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UNIVERSITIES AS COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN AN AGE OF POLITICAL DISCONTENT

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Abstract

This essay considers the positioning of universities as community partners amid uncertain—and for many—unsettling political times. An argument is made for universities to reflect on contemporary trends and to orient their missions to these trends. Inevitably, this work requires universities to think clearly and decisively about ‘what they are good at’ vis-à-vis the needs of the community—regardless of how communities are defined.

Universities already advance different stakeholders’ core aims and values. But even deeper engagement is needed as popular allegiance to democracy shows signs of wear. Distinctive strengths of universities as providers of public goods are considered. The need to step-up community partnerships, as a value-maximization strategy, is highlighted. The question of how partnerships relate to the long-term survival of universities is contemplated.

Keywords: community partnership, values, Harold D. Lasswell.



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1. Background

On November 6, 2024, and in the days and weeks to follow, political scientists, pollsters, and journalists took stock of—for some—the surprisingly decisive triumph and return to presidential power of Donald J. Trump. For universities, two kinds of post-election work are warranted: urgent reflection on ‘what just happened’, but also, more careful and methodical examination of public discontent at the ballot box. Both kinds of analyses are likely to involve self-examination. Looking simultaneously inward and outward, universities might consider how they orient themselves to communities that have had little or no meaningful engagement with the academy.

The early post-mortem on the 2024 election posited a ‘historical realignment’ with previously reliable Democratic and independent-minded voters opting for Trump (Anonymous, 2024a). Later commentators were more skeptical. Some observed that Trump’s margin of victory was small in several key swing states (Wallace-Wells, 2024) and that the public mood reflected economic discontent and poor ‘lead messaging’ by the incumbent party (rather than a historic re-composition of voting blocs and allegiances). There is little doubt, however, that the main arguments made by Presidential candidate Kamala Harris ultimately missed the mark. Many voters were not persuaded by dire warnings of democracy on-the-brink nor did they warm up to a ‘politics of joy’. And there was an undeniable physicality to the winner’s message—a triumph of maleness combined with resentment. Noting Trump’s appeal to young, male audiences, including consumers of conservative podcasts, political scientist James Galloway commented:

‘And it all comes down in my opinion to the same thing. A 30-year-old man or woman isn’t doing as well as his or her parents were at 30 for the first time in America’s history. And if your son isn’t in a relationship, can’t afford to buy a home, is anxious, is depressed—are the rights of Palestinians, territorial sovereignty of Ukraine or trans-rights—does that even register on your screen? This was the testosterone podcast election’ (Anonymous, 2024b).

Commenting to a journalist, Philosopher Jason Stanley declared that ‘... democracy involves compromise, and so it can be represented as sort of a feminized system’ (Fadel, 2024). In contrast, ‘the strongman’ presents an alternative type of leadership that demands loyalty disguised as efficiency’.

Comparable political outcomes in the 2020s are evident in other countries and continents. If these trends are ascendant, societal actors everywhere must think clearly about how they will navigate the political space—and still make contributions that matter for the greater good. Economic angst and uncertainty, amid globalization, are not likely to dissipate anytime soon. Unequal opportunity and social immobility are wellsprings of political discontent. How universities help overcome these societal ills will prove important to the communities they serve and also determine universities’ long-term future.

2. Universities' orientation to contemporary politics

The perennial question asked by disgruntled voters, 'What have they done for me?' no longer implicates incumbent politicians, exclusively. It is a refrain heard in college towns and state capitols where the support of higher education is no longer a 'sure thing'. Universities have the technical wherewithal to carefully examine people's feelings of economic insecurity, fear, and grievance. Perhaps more pressing is whether the academy can pivot quickly and decisively enough to produce tangible benefits to different stakeholder groups. And universities will need a muscular approach to non-partisanship that leads with the voices of their own community partners and beneficiaries. When communities validate the work of their partners, they are affirming their partners' value. This is a form of risk management by universities—namely the risk that yesterday's skeptics and critics are tomorrow's adversaries. In these circumstances, it is constructive to have friends and allies.

Universities can advance the vital work of community asset-building in ways that should be familiar to academics: by elevating the core values of knowledge and skill. In public administration and policy arenas, these basic values are tools for empowerment. I argue that empowerment is a kind of Swiss Army knife for problem-solving at all levels—from the individual—to household-level, to whole communities and leagues of nations. Universities are equipped with strategies and tools to help communities gain power over the uncertainties of politics and life, generally. Moving forward, universities must be more than institutions of higher learning, but also 'partners in problem-solving'. Success in doing so will help universities orient themselves to the shifting political sands while making themselves indispensable to the communities they empower.

Seven decades ago, political scientist Harold D. Lasswell proposed that people, everywhere, continually strive to fulfill a set of eight values: power, enlightenment, wealth, well-being, skill, respect, affection, and rectitude (Lasswell, 1956, p. 13). Lasswell was particularly attentive to power as a value (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950). Power, like other values, could be used instrumentally, to fulfill yet other value demands. Hence, one could use power to secure wealth, or vice versa. Contemporary politics provide many examples of the latter. Consider the age-old phenomena of wealthy individuals having an edge in mustering successful campaigns for public office. Ordinary voters are conscious of the advantages of wealth in electoral politics, though they are not necessarily happy about it. In contrast, how candidates tell their 'life story' can deeply affect voters' perspectives. A candidate who evinces values like good character (rectitude) and selfless work for the community (respect) is more likely to prevail (Carnes and Sadin, 2015). In principle, universities—institutions of enlightenment and skill-building—have a preferential place in the public imagination. Survey research reveals that these positive associations are not immutable (Jones, 2024). Nevertheless, Lasswell would argue that the fruits of higher education—learning and knowledge—are values (or 'value-institutions') that people care about, and these preferences are generally stable over time. And education is a tool for accumulating other sought-after things. 'Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change

the world', so declared Nelson Mandela. Universities have always educated their students. Where they must shine in a world of political discontent is in clearly serving others, including whole communities.

3. Universities and public partnership

In the United States, public flagship universities, and in particular, those with 'land-, sea-, and space-grant' (hereafter 'land-grant') missions may have an advantage in this work. Nineteenth century legislation known as the 'Morrill Acts' charged states with founding institutions to '... teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts' (Morrill Act 1862). Over time, these specially designated, publicly funded universities developed degree programs to promote workforce-ready graduates in areas as wide-ranging as home economics, forestry, veterinary medicine, and military science. Vitaly, particularly for the purpose of this essay, most land-grant institutions developed public-facing, community-engaged programs to foster economic development, improve health outcomes, and many other valued outcomes—effectively making community life better across each of Lasswell's eight value categories.

Today, many colleges and universities, small and large, make their presence known and valued by not merely 'providing benefits' to the community, but by partnering with stakeholders and co-authoring the work that ensues. This means direct participation of local actors in all stages of project scoping, planning, execution, and evaluation.

Consider the Archway Partnership at the University of Georgia which '... empowers communities to address long-standing and critical community and economic development needs' (University of Georgia, 2024). The program partners faculty, professional staff, and students from the university with small and rural communities in Georgia. Partners work side-by-side on activities that the communities themselves identify. The priorities for assistance and partnership are the community's own, thereby fostering a sense of community ownership. Through 2024, the Archway Partnership has worked on 16 major activities such as housing and workforce development projects in Burke County and downtown development in the small communities of Hartwell and Clarksville. Many other university units participate in Archway or promote their own, hands-on, local-level engagement, including, but not limited to the policy and economic development activities of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government; training, education, and mediation activities of the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development; myriad student internships in local government sponsored by the School of Public and International Affairs; cooperative extension work pairing experts from the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences and Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources with agrarians; health education collaborations between experts from the College of Public Health and community health officials; and many other examples.

Universities of all sizes and missions are capable of doing this kind of valued work, and in the process, making themselves indispensable to the communities they serve. In the process, they enhance their own reputations—including during uncertain political times.

Many academic departments, institutes, and centers are already part-way to being successful at this work because they are teachers. But teaching alone is not sufficient. Success requires full participation and engagement from the earliest stages of the partnership. This is the essence of empowerment, and for Lasswell and students of Lasswell, it is a process of ‘shaping and sharing of values’. This approach is time-tested across many societal and institutional contexts (Dobyns, Doughty and Lasswell, 1971; Clark, Willard and Cromley, 2000).

4. Concluding remarks

To ensure their long-term survival, is it ‘enough’ for universities to meaningfully partner with—and not merely serve—communities? In precincts outside North America, there are examples of institutions of higher learning dismantled and shut down amid political insecurity and crisis—including universities that were pillars of their community. Yet, institutions that ‘lead with partnering’ may have a higher probability of enduring and perhaps thriving.

There is an expedient aspect to consider in a ‘partner first’ mission. Preparing for plausible—if undesirable—futures is simply rational. A post-apocalyptic landscape for higher education could take a binary form, with institutions deemed to be either ‘part of the solution’ and hence worth keeping, or ‘not helping’ and therefore dispensable. Universities that advance values like enlightenment, well-being, skill, and respect—are more likely to be trusted and ‘valued’ by the communities they work with and for. This author believes that this comparatively stark future will not come to pass. Optimism is justified because higher education remains, and will remain, of keen value to individuals and families for generations to come. Institutions that lead with partnership in their missions will be the most valued of all.

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