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Renewing Higher Education's Mission of Democracy

Posted: 11/13/2014 2:55 pm EST | Updated: 11/13/2014 2:59 pm EST

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At the end of World War II, as millions of young veterans were returning to college,

President Harry S. Truman convened "The President's Commission on Higher Education for Democracy." This Commission described the dire threats then facing democracy around the world and the responsibility of American colleges and universities to address those threats. The Commission declared:

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Education is by far the biggest and the most hopeful of the Nation's enterprises. It is also our people recognized that education for all is not only democracy's foundation but its necessity. Education is the foundation of democratic liberties.

Without an educated citizenry alert to preserve and extend freedom, it would not long endure.

While the Truman Commission stated that educating for democracy "should come first ... among the principal goals for higher education," today, society asks colleges and universities to prepare individuals for jobs in a cost-effective and accessible way. That is an important mission in a global economy, but there is a striking gap between 1947 rhetoric and today's more narrow focus on education for individual economic success.

The Truman Commission set three major goals: "Education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living," "Education directly and explicitly for international understanding and cooperation," and "Education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs."

Preparation for democracy is a powerful tradition of American higher education. At a time when democracy itself is under threat at home and abroad, we must reclaim higher education's legacy by having colleges and universities serve democracy in their teaching, research and outreach.

The White House Domestic Policy Council recently asked [Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service](http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/) (<http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/>) to explore this challenge through a [National Summit on Civic Learning and National Service](http://www.nationalservice.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2014/white-house-president-obama-announces-new-efforts-expand-national) (<http://www.nationalservice.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2014/white-house-president-obama-announces-new-efforts-expand-national>). Working with the Department of Education, the White House Office of Social Innovation and the Corporation for National and Community Service, Tisch College hosted college leaders, experts in higher education, students and community-based organizations on October 16 to generate ideas for strengthening service and civic learning on college campuses.

Participants came from institutions as diverse as Brown University in Rhode Island and the Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona. They were full of ideas and eager to share the impressive programs already in place at their own institutions.

Although a whole network of centers and institutes dedicated to civic engagement has grown, over the past 25 years, in higher education, these programs tend to be optional and, in some cases, marginal on many campuses. Too often, civic learning is not deeply embedded in the mainstream experience of students or deeply connected to faculty teaching and research. Service learning and experiential learning are not measured and assessed in ways that are consequential to the schools or their students. As a result, a relatively small number of students and faculty benefit from these opportunities.

The generation who attend colleges and universities today, the Millennials are committed to service. They have served at high rates in high school and they come to college with the expectation that they will continue to serve. But these young people are understandably cynical about politics and the democratic process. Unfortunately, policymakers, campus leaders, parents and students do not see higher education as education for democracy.

But how will we ever confront our polarized and broken political system if today's young people are not prepared to tackle these deep challenges? Let's begin by rekindling a public appreciation for democratic education, and let's make education for democracy central to the function of a 21st century college or university, not just an option for especially enthusiastic students.

Higher education should continue to invest in, measure and expand the civic learning practices that currently exist on many campuses. These include courses on democracy, community service programs with strong academic content, research projects done in collaboration with community groups, student-run news media and other programs that exist on many campuses.

Students, parents, educators and society at large should demand these experiences, not just for the benefit of individual students, but to restore America's leadership in democracy. If we succeed, a great education would again be one that serves democracy and addresses our most pressing national and global problems, not only as one that boosts a student's job prospects.

Follow Alan D. Solomont on Twitter: www.twitter.com/TischCollege (<http://www.twitter.com/TischCollege>)

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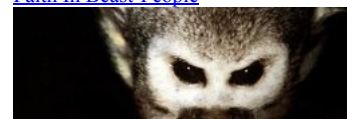
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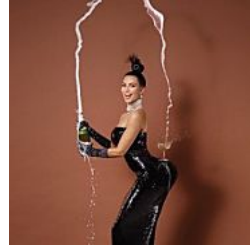
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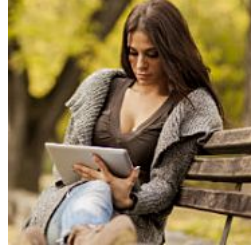
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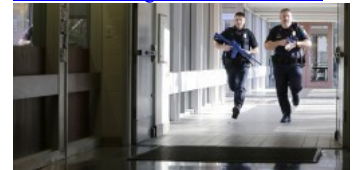
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