

THREE COMMITMENTS TO RESTORING PUBLIC TRUST IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Public trust in higher education is declining. A [recent study](#) by New America indicated that trust in American higher education decreased from 69% to 55% between 2019 and 2022. These numbers are troubling. Colleges and universities are crucial to a democratic society and are important drivers for social change. If public trust in American colleges and universities is declining, then we run the risk of [failing to develop citizens](#) who uphold democratic values. [Ira Harkavy](#), founding director of the [Netter Center for Community Partnerships](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, [said](#) “To put it simply, without democratic higher education, there would be no democratic schooling and no democratic societies.” What can be done to restore public trust in higher education? I present three commitments to mend the relationship between the American public and higher education.

Commitment to state formula funding for democratic values

Colleges and universities alone cannot be reinforcers of democracy. States also have a role, as they provide monetary funds that higher education institutions use to maintain democratic values. Many states allocate institutional funds through a [performance-based formula](#) (PBF) with mathematical weights for pre-determined outcomes, such as degrees awarded, retention, and research productivity. However, formula funding does not account for a college or university’s efforts to uphold democratic values through academic program innovation. I recommend that states revamp their formulas to include a “democratic values” category—to award funds to higher education institutions that explicitly aim to strike a balance between democratic citizenry and industry skill development in their academic programs. For instance, The University of Texas at Austin is launching a [Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence \(AI\)](#) that will teach students about the ethical responsibilities (incorporating non-Western and feminists’ perspectives) of AI professionals interwoven with technical skills. In 1932, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis argued that states are “laboratories of democracy” and thus, it is worthwhile to rethink how higher education funding allocations align with this principle. Institutions can assert that their missions are to educate the American citizenry, but without proper state funding to support the claim, the public will remain skeptical of higher education’s worth.

Commitment to the arts and humanities

In recent years, the [value of the arts and humanities](#) have been questioned by a portion of the American public. A [survey](#) by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences found that only 26% of Americans who received exposure to the humanities in their childhood are enthusiastic about the humanities in their adulthood. The [arts and humanities](#) are foundational to democracy because of their connection to social change, and academic leaders must champion their value amongst the campus community and the American public. The Pennsylvania State University’s [strategic plan](#) dedicates a section to “advancing the arts and humanities,” which emphasizes the societal contribution of these fields, such as addressing the common good in conjunction with technological advancements. Such examples are powerful and help the public understand the importance of the arts and humanities—and should be followed up with institutional creativity to have students learn about its democratic value. Here, I recommend that colleges and universities have a required general education course that teaches artistic achievement and humanities-focused knowledge production. In this course, students could conduct a community-focused service project on a local issue, with a social advocacy final deliverable (e.g., artwork, policy brief, or a podcast recording).

Commitment to democratic education

In her book, [Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope](#), bell hooks describes democratic education as “...learning [that should not be] confined solely to an institutionalized classroom...[In doing so] we share the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite” (p. 41). Colleges and universities should practice this principle by educating traditionally overlooked populations. By removing the institutional barrier, colleges and universities are better able to serve overlooked populations. Such efforts are aligned with changes to the Carnegie Classification system that will include a [new classification](#) for Social and Economic Mobility, and elective classifications for Community Engagement and Leadership for Public Purpose. For example, Eastern University has a [prison education program](#) that allows students to earn an associate degree while being incarcerated. Depending on the local vicinity, several overlooked populations could be available for colleges and universities to educate. This is a tremendous opportunity for higher education, but no single academic institution must embark on this journey alone. Institutions could form a consortium of regional colleges to collaboratively address their population needs. This endeavor would help boost enrollments and allow for cost-sharing between institutions. As educators, we must be working in tandem with communities to strengthen the relationship between the academy and the public.

Conclusion

[Janet Napolitano](#), former President of the University of California System, [said](#) that universities “foster an active thinking citizenry...They enhance a public spirit. They educate—and more importantly—elevate—vast numbers of young people. These institutions are public goods, though, and through, that benefit all of us, and not just the students who attend them.” Our society depends on the knowledge gained in and developed by universities, and the more we demonstrate the above-mentioned commitments, we will be on the way to restoring public trust in higher education.

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