

Conference on Reimagining Democratic Societies: A New Era of Personal and Social Responsibility?

University of Oslo

Introductory Address

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I would like to welcome you on behalf of the US Steering committee of the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy. Founded in 1999, the International Consortium seeks to explain and advance the contributions of higher education to democracy on community college, college, and university campuses, their local communities, and the wider society. The US Steering Committee is comprised of four leading national organizations concerned with promoting the democratic and civic roles of higher education: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education, Association of American Colleges and Universities, and Campus Compact.

The International Consortium is pleased and honored to cosponsor the International Conference on Reimagining Democratic Societies with our long-term partner, the Council of Europe, as well as with our new partners: the European Wergeland Center, the University of Oslo, the International Association of Universities, and the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research.

Although more individuals live and desire to live in democratic societies than ever before, we meet at a time of deep concern for a realizing a

genuinely democratic future for all citizens. The problems of American democracy, for example, are quite familiar to my US colleagues:

1. Increasing poverty and its various concomitants: ill health, unemployment, poor schooling.
2. Increasing economic, political, social, and educational inequalities.
3. Increasing racism and xenophobia.
4. Declining trust in nearly all major institutions.
5. Declining civic participation and engagement.

Given these and other problems, reimagining democratic societies is surely crucial. But reimagining is merely the first step in a two-step process. The harder step is to specify what should be done to help reinvigorate democratic societies in and for the 21st century. The Conference's focus on education, schooling, and higher education in particular is precisely, in my judgment, the right place to begin the process of reimagining, reinvigorating, indeed of recreating.

I strongly agree with the Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi that the answer to the question "What kind of education do we need?" is to be found in the answer to the question "What kind of society do we want?" Education and society are dynamically interactive and interdependent. If human beings hope to maintain and develop a particular type of society, they must develop and maintain the particular type of education system conducive to it. To cut to the chase, no effective democratic schooling system, no democratic society.

Higher education has the potential to powerfully contribute to the democratic transformation of schools, communities, and societies. Higher educational institutions possess significant human (and other)

resources, play a leading role in developing and transmitting new discoveries and educating leaders, and play a preeminent role in shaping the schooling system, notably through the education of teachers. In short, what institutions of higher education do and how they do it, what they teach and how they teach has enormously complex and far reaching impacts on the entire schooling system and on society in general.

The American higher educational system, in my judgment, does not sufficiently contribute to the development of democratic schools and communities. American research universities, for example, significantly contribute to an elitist, hierarchical schooling system. Moreover, as the International Consortium's Democracy Project has shown, American higher education has largely failed to effectively educate its students for democratic citizenship. But the times and American higher education have fortunately been changing. Campus Compact, a national coalition of community college, college, and university presidents dedicated to civic engagement has grown from three institutional members in 1985 to over 1,100 in 2009, approximately a quarter of all higher educational institutions in the United States. The vast majority of Compact members are engaged in partnerships with schools in their local communities.

When we view this International Conference in historical perspective, the significance of the gathering is better appreciated. Viewed in historical perspective, I believe, the Conference constitutes a major development in the progress of the Scientific Revolution that Francis Bacon worked to promote in the early 17th century. Bacon's devastating criticisms of the parochial, tradition-bound universities, which transmitted and perpetuated antiquated learning and

methodology, powerfully helped revolutionize scientific inquiry, as well as usher in modern thought. Among the major defects Bacon attributed to universities, their internal divisions and failure of “all the different universities of Europe” to collaborate closely ranked high. Viewed from that perspective, the International Conference on Reimagining Democratic Societies can be characterized as a positive response to Bacon’s proposal that higher educational institutions collaborate across cultures and national boundaries to advance learning and human welfare.

I look forward to our reimagining democratic societies and to our developing new ideas—ideas that, when put into practice, could contribute to creating and sustaining genuinely democratic universities, schools and societies for all.