

Chapter 11

Public work and reclaiming the democratic impulse of higher education in these pandemic times

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THE INTERSECTION OF THREE PANDEMICS

Here we find ourselves in 2020 living at the intersection of three pandemics. The novel coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of how we live and work and has pointedly illustrated the tension between public health and economic well-being. Following in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, an economic pandemic threatens our social fabric with massive unemployment and business closures worldwide. And, most recently, the racial inequities exacerbated by the senseless murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers have created a third pandemic that threatens to tear the United States apart. Surely this uncharted terrain presents unique challenges for all of us as citizens, trying to imagine how we will navigate to some as yet unknown future.

I experience the intersection of these three pandemics with anger and resolve as President of Augsburg University, one of the most diverse institutions in the United States and located in one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in the country. The impact of these pandemics on our students, faculty and staff – and on the immigrant neighbours we cherish – is stark. Their health, their economic well-being and their safety are all threatened. And I feel an urgent responsibility to act in response to those threats.

There is much we can – and will – do as a university to accompany our community as we deploy our many resources to work on health, economic and safety challenges. In fact, Augsburg University possesses, in its 150-year history, threads of democratic and public work commitments that will shape our efforts in the days and years ahead (Adamo 2019). This, then, is an important moment for our university and all of higher education to lean into the impact of these pandemics with a powerful response grounded in our democratic commitments.

THE DEMOCRATIC IMPULSE OF US HIGHER EDUCATION

There are a variety of pathways in the US system of higher education, each of which illustrates what I would call a “democratic impulse” in mission and purpose. It is an impulse that embraces a commitment to the integration of dignified work and citizenship for the well-being of our commonwealth. It is an impulse present in the founding charters and in many forms throughout the history of these diverse institutions (see Association of Governing Boards 2019), and yet there is also evidence of how that democratic impulse has been eroded over the years – eroded by both institutional neglect and external forces.

For example, private liberal arts institutions were originally founded as “democracy colleges”, meant to educate citizens to lead and pursue their work with a sense of purpose and dignity. Private research universities were organised as knowledge creators, contributing to the scientific and professional communities. And yet, in both cases, these institutions today are often seen as elite and disconnected from the communities in which they are located.

Another example is the US land-grant institutions, which were chartered by the federal government in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to pursue applied learning and community outreach, and yet now compete for rankings often based on metrics unrelated to the needs of the communities they serve. Consider also our community and technical colleges, established after the Second World War to provide universal access for students to pursue vocational opportunities; these colleges were often buffeted by public disagreements about goals, funding and mixed outcomes for students. In both land-grant institutions and community colleges, the founding commitments to the dignity and centrality of work contributing to community capacity have been eroded, often replaced with an instrumental economic focus.

My point is twofold: the democratic work-centred impulse for higher education is present in the founding and history of institutions, but it has also been eroded and challenged to the point where that impulse may not be evident in the life of institutions today.

So, what to do? As a long-time university leader committed to the democratic impulse in the history of my institution, I believe that I must identify resources – especially intellectual resources – that can help renew that democratic impulse. The urgency of that renewal has been made more pressing by the intersecting pandemics of our time, each of which in its own way threatens the mission and work we pursue.

THREE LESSONS FROM THE SETTLEMENT HOUSE TRADITION

I believe that one compelling source of those intellectual resources is found in the settlement house tradition.

The settlement house tradition, born in the east end of London in the late 19th century by Oxford-educated young people, sought to model how taking up residence in the midst of immigrant neighbourhoods, engaging neighbours in exploring how best to respond to the realities of their lives and then working co-operatively alongside each other to make the neighbourhood safer, cleaner and more just, could help

solve urban problems and ultimately shape public policy to be more respectful of the value and dignity of work (Toynbee Hall 2018).

In other words, settling in a neighbourhood, becoming a neighbour, was seen as the most effective way to ensure healthier and more vibrant urban communities. This was in juxtaposition to the idea of experts coming into a neighbourhood to offer and/or impose their solutions. The well-educated settlement residents certainly had expertise to offer, but it was offered in the context of neighbourhood-wide engagement and participation. The lessons learned from these neighbourhood efforts then became the impetus for social policies that would shape urban life for decades to come.

In the United States, the settlement house tradition took root initially in New York and then Chicago, where Jane Addams and her colleagues founded Hull House in 1889 on the near west side of the city and sought to transform a troubled immigrant neighbourhood. Their work at Hull House – including educational programmes, community centres, libraries, music schools, theatres, sanitation, work on child labour practices and honouring cultural heritages – illustrated the wide range of efforts pursued in response to the needs of neighbours, the richness of immigrant cultures and the value and importance of immigrant work traditions (Addams 1910).

Though the settlement houses themselves were gradually abandoned, the tenets of the settlement house tradition took root in other forms in the late 20th and early 21st century. As Ira Harkavy and John Puckett argued in 1994, the idea of applied sociology which the early settlement leaders wrote about and practised offers a moral and pragmatic framework for colleges and universities to “function as perennial, deeply rooted settlements, providing illuminated space for their communities as they conduct their mission of producing and transmitting knowledge to advance human welfare and to develop theories that have broad utility and application” (Harkavy and Puckett 1994: 312).

Especially for urban, place-based institutions like Augsburg University, the settlement house tradition (and specifically the work of Jane Addams and her colleagues at Hull House in Chicago) offers three key ideas that inform our response to the pandemic and help us renew the democratic impulse of our institutions.

Democracy as a social ethic

Democracy, for Jane Addams, was not simply a creed or a sentiment or a political system, but an ethic that challenges us to balance individual needs and interests with the common good. In her *Democracy and social ethics* (Addams 1902 2002), Addams describes the idea of democracy as a social ethic with a simple image: we are all travellers on a thronged road, she said, and our minimum responsibility to each other is to understand the burdens we bear (ibid.: 7) – in other words, to know each other’s stories and circumstances. That is the basis for a democratic social ethic. The genius of democracy is that the self does not go away but enters into a relationship with others in mutual need and aspiration.

This is not a utopia, but a way of negotiating our lives together in a messy world. As we all recognise, things will not always go well, but with a democratic way of life

they will go forward towards a horizon of shared purpose and dignified work that inspires and energises our community.

Similarly, in his recent essay entitled *With the people: an introduction to an idea*, David Mathews argues that “Democracy is us – The People. And we can restore our sense of sovereignty ... by what we produce every day using the abilities and resources of our fellow citizens. And when the things that happen frustrate, disappoint and anger us – as they will – the question we have to ask ourselves is not what is wrong with democracy, but what are we going to do about it? That question can only be answered *with one another*” (Mathews 2020: 34).

As universities committed to this idea of democracy as a social ethic, this “with” way of living together, we embrace the work we do – teaching, scholarship and service – with a clear regard and a sense of humility about how we might do that work alongside our neighbours – neighbours who may not share our ideological, religious or political commitments – not apart from them.

This concept of democracy as a social ethic has informed our work as part of two anchor partnerships in our metropolitan area. Anchor institutions are universities, hospitals and other enduring organisations that play a vital role in their local communities and economies. They tend to remain in their geographical settings, even as conditions change around them (AITF 2020). In both the Cedar-Riverside Partnership and the Central Corridor Anchor Partnership, Augsburg University comes to the table with our neighbourhood partners, stating our self-interest as an institution while we explore the potential for shared value for our neighbourhood. Over the past decade, our anchor work has addressed neighbourhood safety, workforce, youth programmes, transportation, infrastructure and place-making. The results are examples of how higher education institutions can lean into pressing community challenges as authentic partners, with our neighbours (Walljasper 2020).

Our public work in the 21st century is informed by the Norwegian-American Haugean Lutherans who founded Augsburg University in 1869. Inspired by the spirit of community practised by the early Christians, Hans Nielsen Hauge⁵⁷ was a lay preacher and skilled entrepreneur who believed that the established Lutheran church in Norway did not create healthy and just communities. He sought to put the ideal of a common and shared economy into practice in Norway, preaching the gospel on Sundays and living out the gospel through the week by creating new businesses in which work was valued. As followers of his ideas, our founders believed deeply in the ways in which work and citizenship were inextricably linked by building sustainable communities (Adamo 2019).

An expansive understanding of knowing and knowledge

One of the most striking characteristics of the settlement house tradition was the embrace of various forms of knowing and knowledge. In this way, the settlement houses helped immigrant neighbours assimilate to new surroundings,

57. For more information about Hauge, see www.britannica.com/biography/Hans-Nielsen-Hauge, accessed 1 July 2020.

while at the same time helping them hold onto cultural practices and wisdom that might disappear in a new setting.

For example, at Hull House, Jane Addams recognised that certain ethnic and cultural craft practices were difficult to maintain without the materials and equipment to pursue them. In order to create opportunities to continue these craft practices, she created the Labour Museum (Addams 1910: 171-8), where neighbours practised these cultural arts and also passed them along to the next generation and to neighbours unfamiliar with the practices. This was a means of sustaining cultural knowledge and thereby enriching neighbourhood life.

For colleges and universities, the concepts of what constitutes knowledge and ways of knowing are often limited to particular traditions such as the scientific method with its evidence-based claims or Western concepts of what constitutes truth and beauty. The settlement house tradition reminds us that there is knowledge and wisdom from many sources, and our openness to diverse forms of knowledge and ways of knowing has the potential to enrich our lives.

An example of this openness to different forms of knowledge for Augsburg is linked to our now regular practice of “land acknowledgements” at public events. This is one example:

Augsburg’s spirit is propelled by a heartbeat that started long before us. That heartbeat was present even before our founding 150 years ago – it was present when the land where Augsburg today stands was stewarded by the Dakota people. The Dakota are the original inhabitants of this area, and they are still here today. We honour their wisdom about this place, their recognition that we are all part of the same creation. We share their sense of obligation to the larger community, including to future generations. (Augsburg University 2020)

We acknowledge that the land we occupy was originally settled by the Lakota and Ojibwe peoples, and we go further to lift up the ways in which Indigenous peoples teach us important lessons – lessons we have forgotten – about how to be good stewards of the land. Knowledge and wisdom from native peoples expand and enhance our stewardship, understanding and practices.

An openness to new social arrangements

Throughout the history of settlement houses, a crucial strategy was to listen to the needs of neighbours and neighbourhoods before organising ways of responding to those needs. In other words, there was an openness to what I would call diverse “social arrangements” and there were no predetermined ways to organise.

At Hull House in early 20th-century Chicago, this sometimes meant a patchwork of organisational models, as the needs of neighbours overrode any static, bureaucratic responses. A museum for labour and crafts here, a youth centre there; a kindergarten here, a library there; a neighbourhood sanitation team here, a safe labour practices group there. And perhaps most compelling about this openness to various social arrangements was the willingness of Addams and the neighbours to admit when a particular arrangement did not work and search for a better option (Addams 1910: 109).

For American colleges and universities, the idea of fluid social arrangements flies in the face of a fairly conservative, hierarchical bureaucracy, marked by many silos and layers, making it difficult to adjust to shifting needs. Yet, it is incumbent upon us to explore different organisational forms that create fluid boundaries within campuses and between campuses and the wider community, undoing the often privileged and static forms of organisational life that become obstacles for access and opportunity (Association of Governing Boards 2019).

At Augsburg, this openness to fluid social arrangements has taken various forms. For example, we have reviewed all institutional policies and practices through an equity lens, identifying where long-standing policies create obstacles to student progress and success. We also have partnered with various organisations, such as the Urban Debate League (MNUDL 2020), to bring them as permanent residents to our campus. Based on shared commitments to education, civic engagement and diversity, these partner organisations benefit from our material infrastructure, freeing them to use their resources more directly in areas of common interest, while the Augsburg community benefits from staff and programming that enrich our work in the community. Fluid organisational boundaries make it possible to obtain mutual benefit in pursuit of common values and commitments.

RENEWING THE DEMOCRATIC IMPULSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THESE PANDEMIC TIMES

So, we return to these pandemic times, looking for evidence of this public work in our community – evidence that these ideas from the settlement house tradition can make a difference. And here I find Professor Katie Clark from Augsburg’s Nursing faculty, leading our Health Commons in the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak, meeting the needs of those in our community experiencing homelessness. And there I see our students, responding to a pandemic of systemic racism, putting their black and brown and white bodies at risk protesting for racial equity and law enforcement reform. And there I find our faculty and staff, seeing the distressing impact of unemployment and economic unrest in our immediate neighbourhood, stepping outside of their daily routines to provide food and housing and security to our immigrant neighbours so at risk.

Surely there are a multitude of intellectual resources that might help inform how colleges and universities embrace their democratic work. My examples have made a significant impact on our work at Augsburg and continue to shape my leadership, especially in these pandemic times. My challenge to my colleagues in higher education is to (as I tell our incoming students each autumn) show up, pay attention and do the work, because our presence, our attention and our public work are more urgently important for our democracy than ever before.

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