

The Messiness and Fragility of Democracy and Higher Education

Eli Kramer

James C. Hall

Guest Editors

Welcome to this Special Issue

We are pleased to share with you this special issue of the *Journal of School & Society* on “Student Autonomy, Public Civility, and Social Justice on Higher Education Campuses.” We thank Kyle Greenwalt and the John Dewey Society for supporting this important and timely collection of essays.

In the first part of the introduction we discuss the origins and focus of the special issue, as well as survey and summarize the connections between the special issue essays. In the second section, in Deweyan spirit, the editors offer a dialogue on the themes of the special issue.

Background

This special issue was first conceived as part of the organizing work of the John Dewey Society Democracy in Education Initiative.¹ The Initiative was an outgrowth of the centennial celebration of the publication of Dewey’s seminal, *Democracy and Education*, a conference hosted by

¹ For more on the Democracy in Education Initiative, see: <http://www.johndewey.org/democracy-in-education-initiative/>.

the John Dewey Society in spring 2016.

A collaboration of Deweyan educational philosophers, the Initiative is an ongoing experiment in fostering new modes of philosophical inquiry and public work related to progressive education. In September 2017, the JDS Executive Committee offered Eli Kramer, a member of the organizing team, seed funding support to collaborate with existing progressive educational organizations and create new projects related to the civic and democratic purposes of JDS. Eli is joined by civic education leader Harry Boyte and JDS Past President Kathleen Knight Abowitz as co-directors of the Initiative.

As part of a series of relation-building discussions with key leaders in the P-20 civic and community schooling network, Eli began a dialogue with James Hall, the then Convener of the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL).² In their discussion, they explored the challenges around student autonomy, public civility, and social justice on higher education campuses, especially in North America. As a first step in addressing these intractable issues, through collaboration between the JDS and the CIEL, and with the support of Kyle Greenwalt, they decided to create this Special Issue.

Thematic and Essays

One of the most pressing “problematic situations”³ in higher education today is that of free speech, civility, and social justice on our campuses.

² For more on the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning, see: <https://cielearn.org/>.

³ In Dewey’s sense of the term. For example, see: John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey: The Later Works of John Dewey: 1925–1953: 1938, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Volume 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 105-122.

Colleges and universities are struggling to maintain communicative exchange and inquiry

Colleges and universities are struggling to maintain communicative exchange and inquiry, and they are seemingly unable to mobilize collective energy to create democratic change. From negotiating rules for civil exchange and boundaries of acceptable speech and dialogue, to developing equity, labor, and other protections for university actors, faculty, students, administrators, staff, and outside parties—clearly, there is a general struggle to talk and work together across difference, while resisting fundamental injustice. As concerned citizens, teachers, students, parents, faculty, administrators, and politicians, we look to institutions of higher learning as centers of our civic life. Today, we are struggling with some of the most basic and difficult questions of democracy.

To help ameliorate this problematic situation, we have brought together a unique range of perspectives from different college and university campuses, both public and private. These essays aim to: account for the dialogue, mobilization, and justice challenges on our campuses; reflect broadly on the larger meaning of these challenges; and offer ameliorative solutions and strategies of response. The essays come from students, emerging scholars, student life/social justice and equity administrators, senior faculty, and executive administration. The essays are written in a range of styles, some academic studies, and some personal narratives of challenge. Together, they provide insight into some of the challenges, and some of the ameliorative opportunities, for our campuses today.

In the first half of the special issue, we hear from those in a variety of positions outside of

the normal faculty and administrative bubble.

In our lead essay, “An Adjunct to Free Speech Debates on Campus—Or, Free Speech to an Adjunct,” James Anderson, adjunct faculty at a collection of schools in the Los Angeles area, lays out the history of the Free Speech Movement (FSM) and explains how progress in free speech in the United States has always been, and still is, grounded in both labor practices and collective organizing to leverage meaningful improvement in academic labor. He highlights how the very defense of tenure and academic freedom also laid the groundwork for the two-tiered system of higher education, where an adjunct class, with their precarious work and free speech, maintain the privileges of the ever-more-narrow field of tenured faculty and protected administrators. He proposes a public pedagogy that engages in consequential speech: raising critical consciousness through developing alternative practices and spaces to address injustice. Anderson suggest that old style labor organizing, such as strikes, slow-downs, and other forms of praxis, are critical to changing the two-tier system.

Today, we are struggling with some of the most basic and difficult questions of democracy.

In the following essay, we explore, through a personal narrative, yet another aspect of precarious labor, and a correlate kind of barely protected speech: the life of an ABD Humanities graduate student. Austin Rooney, a doctoral student in philosophy at Temple University, in “Wandering Through the Desert, and Other Forms of Graduate Insecurity [Completely Provisional Title, Open to Suggestions],” give us his personal account of stifled creativity and acquiescence to the harsh demands needed to survive in the academy. These demands can

curtail creativity and teaching by leaving graduate students hollow instead of engaged learners.

It is not, however, only graduate students and adjunct contingent labor that are the underbelly of the free speech and civil discourse debates on North American campuses. In recent years, international student populations at American liberal arts colleges have rapidly grown. These students, often wealthy or on government grants, have become a critical revenue source to maintain tuition dollars at residential campuses, who are increasingly in desperate circumstances. James Besse, an alumnus of Bennington College, in “Diversity, Discourse, and Exclusion on Liberal Arts Campuses,” gives us his personal experience meeting international students who are frustrated and excluded from progressive discourses on American campuses.

increasing polarization in the public sphere potentially renders this faith naïve

While these first essays help underscore some of the deeper problematic currents underlying student autonomy, public civility, and social justice issues on North American campuses, the other essays in the special issue offer ameliorative solutions. Nick Daily, Assistant Dean of Students and Black Student Affairs at the Claremont Colleges, Jenn Wells, Assistant Dean and Director of SCORE at Scripps College, and Victor Ultra Omni, a transfer Student at Pitzer College, for example, show how a restorative and transformational justice lens can help us engage with campus protest and dissent as an educational opportunity. Such an approach seeks to uncover and address the very kinds of deeper systematic issues discussed in the earlier essays.

Our other ameliorative stories come from

institutions that are a part of CIEL. Historically, CIEL programs and campuses have welcomed student initiative and action in efforts to identify and call out local practices that inhibit justice or voice for economically-disadvantaged or underrepresented communities.

Of late, however, such action, without rich attention to the needs of multiple stakeholders, and without attention to the multiplying external effects of social media, has produced situations that seemingly inhibit the formation of constructive coalition-building or meaningful policy action. These campuses have long histories of practices that leverage student energy and initiative and provide real grounding for civil engagement and authentic deliberation.

Some of these practices need a greater spotlight; others need to be re-evaluated in a political context that often rallies external constituencies with little investment in community well-being. Across their institutional borders, they highly value a vision of student autonomy that prepares for democratic citizenship and simultaneously recognizes that increasing polarization in the public sphere potentially renders this faith naïve and in need of new preparation and contextualization.

Our first story comes from the alma mater of Eli Kramer, one of the editors for this special issue: the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies of the University of Redlands. In “A Place to Practice: Incivility, Curriculum, and Institutional Intelligence,” Julie Townsend, Director of Johnston and Professor of Interdisciplinary Humanities, and Tim Seiber, Johnston Assistant Professor of Science and Media Studies, offer important examples of working with and alongside student interest in current campus issues. They also see such issues as critical educational opportunities, without getting caught up in narrow dualisms about “civil” vs “hateful” speech, and “education” vs “protest and free speech acts.”

Marcela Jordão Villaça, senior at Quest University, and James Steven Byrne, Interim Chief Academic Officer and Humanities Tutor at Quest University, follow up the suggestion to build these issues into the very curriculum of a college in their article, “Student-Administration Relations: Lessons from a Small Liberal Arts and Sciences University.” They highlight how this work can be done symbiotically—with care and thoughtfulness—building bridges across the student-administrative divide.

Likewise, John Miller, Assistant Director of New College of the University of Alabama, and Asia Hayes, a senior at New College and Director of the DREAM Alabama Mentoring Initiative, illuminate what such educative work can look like on a large public university campus—one that, like many of our educational institutions, must struggle with a legacy of racism and white supremacy.

In our final essay we generalize beyond the campus context of these issues, to reflect on modern, enlivening, education-entertainment (*edutainment*), and what role it plays in a fruitful engagement with civic and social justice issues in the world. Myron Jackson, in “Edutainment and Panexperiential Learning in the Radically Empirical Classroom,” offers us a vision of how emergent, online popular culture—often disparaged as precipitating the crises of civility on our campuses—is also a critical site for robust creative education. Instead of drawing us to traditional calls to traditional learning, civility, and duty in the classroom, Jackson call us to take seriously the world of meaning and adventure our students find themselves in. It is this very digital space, from discussions of sports, to television, to race and identity politics, that must not be resisted, but deepened: all through catalyzing higher education students’ reflective and creative engagement with our shared world of meaning.

Editorial Dialogue

Jim: I’m impressed by the work of our contributors, which seems to me measured, thoughtful, and nicely distant from some of the cultural hysteria about speech and civility. They are attentive to the value of open inquiry and thoughtful about the challenges of working in a pluralistic community. We are, of course, limited by the nature and character of our collegial networks and we, as the editors of this issue, probably do not account for the richest range of discourse in the best version of public debate about speech and inquiry.

In other ways, I worry more about some particular kinds of reflection that might have offered the fullest context for this good work. Our framing of the scope of the issue is done so with a general commitment to student learning and its conditions. In terms of illuminating contemporary issues for the fullest set of stakeholders, there are necessary historical, cultural, and legal clarifications to be insisted upon. As a document for non-educators, we are probably lacking a technical essay that clarifies the meaning of free speech in public and private spaces, from both a Constitutional perspective and history of higher education perspective. Questions of case law and case studies in discriminatory practice both build nuance and press back against absolutist or utopian notions of speech rights.

It is fair to assert, I think, that the “campus” is not an especially useful frame

Similarly, a descriptive account of the responsibilities of administrators and other managers of speech environments, as placed upon them by the Civil Rights Act, the ADA, and other access and fairness interventions, would

generate some caution against articulations of both coddling or perspectival ignorance. As teachers, administrators, and trustees—we simply don't always get to call the tune. We are asked to build learning spaces that are open, safe, and non-hostile—even as sometimes these commitments can be in conflict.

As I read and attend to public debates about speech and civility I am struck (as an academic, of course!) by a muddle in nomenclature and clear concept. There is an assumption, for instance, that all speech acts are similar in nature in a learning environment. I am especially unsure of the nature and function (and difference between) advocacy and inquiry and haven't settled for myself whether or not one might have different "civil" expectations for the classroom and the quad.

Shouting?

Chanting?

I worry that it is difficult outside of a specific speech network to fully understand the ways in which one person's determined attempt to call out an injustice (surely a speech act) can feel to another like an egregious disruption of civic agency. Similarly, certain kinds of speech acts have had a long history of undermining certain communities' dignity and their ability to be considered legitimate actors at all. If there was a sustained public intervention I might wish for—it would be for some collective reflection on this paradox.

All of this is to say is that there is a vast amount of imprecision in the public sphere, the media, the legislative and pundit branches about a "crisis in campus speech." It is fair to assert, I think, that the "campus" is not an especially useful frame and that the dorm room, the public square, the classroom, the faculty meeting, and faculty and student social media accounts, may be different democratic spaces with different rules of engagement. It seems a useful first step to get all actors to admit to

these differences and the responsibilities they entail.

Whatever imprecision and whatever willful ideological disruption, I think it might be argued that you could drill down and get to some core question about adulthood and democratic participation. One side argues for a necessary respect, acknowledgment of past wrongs, and the perplexing nature of power as a base condition of exchange, growth, learning, and reconciliation. The other argues for a kind of fearlessness in the face of ideas that upset us, challenge us, even condemn us, as a precondition to democratic advance. Something—they say—must be absolutely non-negotiable: authentically face-to-face, unmediated, intellect to intellect.

I present both positions on that core question with their best face forward. The first can often feel obstructionist, preoccupied with personal hurt, and slickly manipulative of an intersectional calculus that lets one put one's most vulnerable foot forward. The second, most bluntly, can be an excuse and cover for racist abuse, misogynist play, and exclusionary in-group populism—free speech absolutism in the service of everything from naughtiness to hatred, intimidation, and violence.

Eli: I agree: one of the great challenges of putting together a special issue of this sort is scope. One's professional networks, and those of a journal, only go so far.

Further, institutions with the most to say, those in crises, are often just those who are reluctant to speak. This brings up a painful truth about seeking to tell stories of amelioration within an academic publication: the modes of presentation for academic life, like journals, are also a part of the power/knowledge nexus under investigation. In pragmatic fashion, I would say, there is no "spectator view" in real, lived,

situations.

Perhaps there is analogy with Dewey's own tensions as a scholar and that of our thematic for this special issue. Dewey has often been criticized for lacking a thorough analysis of discourse/power.⁴ Yet others, like Cornel West, have defended Dewey as a strategic organizer of collection action.⁵ Dewey attempted to respond from within the institutionalized academy to the problems that were fundamental to its organization: the nature of academic work, democratic processes, and the dualisms of a classed, late-capitalist culture.

**... the university is a nexus of
the larger crises of democratic
faith in the US**

Dewey, too, experienced a kind of limit on speech: that of professionalization on one hand, and on the other, in his sense of audience and the ameliorative work one can speak to. As Avi I Mintz has demonstrated,⁶ works like *Democracy and Education* reveal an implicit tactic for calling out current critical political actors, by embedding them as representatives of particular, one-sided perspectives in the history of education. Dewey suggested that our first duty—while fathoming the depths and nuances of the complex publics, from the classroom to the dorm room—is to find the ameliorative modes of organizing as well as conceptual frameworks that might offer an always-tentative way for-

ward.

Toward this end, I think one obvious starting place is an acknowledgement that the university is a nexus of the larger crises of democratic faith in the US and can't be thought of as some isolated entity that can ameliorate problems on its own. As books like *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* reveal, the American university is rooted in the deepest and most painful aspects of American civilization: our unreconciled history of slavery and genocide.⁷

I'm not suggesting that simply unearthing these truths, and seeking truth and reconciliation, is the whole solution (though that would be a good step). Rather, I want to say that American higher education's culpability in the bad, and its relation to the good, is deep. It has been a kind of microcosm of American life.

What will not ameliorate the situation, then, are quick fixes to issues with deep roots. We need educative spaces to move beyond discussion, to begin initiating non-sectarian organizing efforts to make change in our broader communities. Here, projects produced by Civic Studies scholars, such as Public Achievement,⁸ or the organizers of the University Assisted Community Schools movement,⁹ offer steps in the right direction. We need robust public work options that can ameliorate the dualism between the town and the gown.

We also need patience and organizing support to defend our communities of inquiry. De-

⁴ R.W. Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009).

⁵ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 69-111.

⁶ Avi I Mintz, "Dewey's Ancestry, Dewey's Legacy, and the Aims of Education in Democracy and Education," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 8, no.1 (2016).

⁷ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁸ For more, see: Harry C. Boyte, *Awakening Democracy through Public Work: Pedagogies of Empowerment* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press).

⁹ For more, see: Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, John Puckett et al., *Knowledge for Social Change: Bacon, Dewey, and the Revolutionary Transformation of Research Universities in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017).

cisions like that of University of Chicago's to make a top-down decision about trigger warnings,¹⁰ when faculty, students, and staff were just testing the waters, shows overhaste. Of course, none of these attempts will be perfect, and we all might vehemently disagree, but it does matter to let things unfold in equitable ways. I do think the university is better and more sensitive than it was in previous generations, but it took all sorts of messy work to get anywhere.

Finally, I think it is ok to say that higher education is at a volatile moment—and for good or ill, it is rapidly changing. Keeping the ship running is going to be a messy and painful business. Expecting of ourselves grand solutions for the discontents on campus, without patience and support for the little-d-democracy-as-way-of-life practices, that over time, through relation building, do find tentative solutions, is part of the problem. We don't need big answers, or new paradigms about how to reach across difference. We need to build and rally behind deep relationships in our schools and broader communities, and use those to come to the slow, step-by-step solutions to crises that have no answers. Like Johnston Center's community meetings (described by Julie Townsend and Tim Seiber in this special issue), we will probably never have satisfying answers to our most basic questions, but we can build communities of deep relation and inquiry to make tentative steps forward and build a sense of solidarity for that work.

One last concern that is worth emphasizing: I can't help but feel a frustration and weariness with the discussion as it stands. So much is stake, include people's basic dignity and very lives, due to skin color, race, gender, sexuality,

disability, health, and immigration status. The struggles of these communities extend well beyond the university, and the university itself, as a slow and fairly conservative institution, is poorly equipped to respond.

Yet, we often act as if the crises of culture were merely something floating minds could discuss as they sit on the sidelines. I think, on all sides, there is a feeling of frustration with an isolated academism and professionalism—one that is a poorly equipped to respond to the depths of our present situation.

Jim: Thank you for elucidating the opportunities and limits associated Dewey's thought on these questions.

... the latest hot-breaking news story often dis-tracts us from the deep, messy, and personal work

I would highlight Dewey's important role in the establishment of the AAUP's 1915 Declaration of Principles which seems to me not inattentive to questions of power at all, although he most certainly places front and center a pragmatist framing of epistemology and decision-making.¹¹ Know the local. Understand relationships. Respect a *calling*, an attitude and orientation towards learning and inquiry.

Dewey and his colleagues found freedom to research and teach already (somewhat) well safeguarded, but they worried most about

¹⁰ See David Schaper, "University of Chicago Tells Freshmen It Does Not Support 'Trigger Warnings,'" in All Things Considered, National Public Radio, August 26, 2016.

¹¹ AAUP, "1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," <https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A6520A9D-0A9A-47B3-B550-C006B5B224E7/0/1915Declaration.pdf>.

“freedom of extra-mural utterance and action.”¹² The committee’s work was done, of course, in the midst of increasing anti-immigration sentiment, the rise of war-fueled populism and anti-German sentiment and demands for loyalty. And Dewey would play an important role in the aftermath of the 1919 Red Summer disruptions.

Dewey anticipated and recognized, even then, that it is often in liminal spaces of university campuses where the disruption of a general—even universal—commitment to free speech will find its most telling crisis. Power in this regard is mostly state and university power to limit interventions against its own authority—especially outside the teaching and research function. The messiness is in advocacy, critiques of authority, and in political declaration.

Alas, what the AAUP statement did not and perhaps could not anticipate are articulations of power that are multifaceted, or perhaps, what we might refer to as intersectional. In mostly unquestioned homogenous learning environments—Jewish quotas, black bans—professional guidance and deliberation most focused on explicitly hierarchical structures and relationships. This, as opposed to frames for mitigation and reconciliation between competing identity groups, each looking to establish status in the institutional ecosystem.

I am confident that the contributions here move us towards a more multifaceted and resilient model for thinking about what institutional citizenship might look like.

Conclusion

We hope that the essays here, and our dialogue above, illustrate that more deep work ought to be done exploring different aspects of Student

Autonomy, Public Civility, and Social Justice on Higher Education Campuses.

One predominant theme throughout this special issue is that the latest hot-breaking news story often distracts us from the deep, messy, and personal work that maintains the all-too-fragile places for rich higher education in the United States. The task before us is one that is lived and has significant consequences for real people. It requires more than discussion—indeed, it requires collective relationship-building and collective action.

The John Dewey Society, the Democracy in Education Initiative, and CIEL will continue to be at the center of such work.

¹² *Ibid.*, 292.