

Democracy in Education Initiative: Vocations Working Group Mission Statement

The work of the “public intellectual” has always been central to democratic life. From Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jane Addams, Eugene Debs, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Rachel Carson, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Luther King Jr., to Betty Friedan, James Q. Wilson, Noam Chomsky, William F. Buckley, Edward Said, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, American public intellectuals have written and spoken in front of wide audiences, worked alongside a wide range of public institutions, and expanded Americans’ understanding of who we are and what’s possible for us to achieve together.

Despite the few rare exceptions, today this tradition is under threat. Academic and professional culture encourages intellectual work meant for elite audiences and corporate contracts, while mainstream consumer culture considers pretty much all intellectual work irrelevant. The result is a culture where we have little chance to “stop and think what we are doing,” in Arendt’s words -- and even less chance of finding a decent job doing it.

Higher education -- colleges and universities -- would be an obvious place to look. But after enduring a five- to ten-year initiation ritual, i.e. grad school in the humanities or social sciences, academics who wish to be public intellectuals find themselves isolated and adrift. They leave graduate school facing immense pressure to compete for a shrinking number of faculty jobs, in a process that rewards technical expertise and narrow specialization. Even after getting one of these coveted positions, a would-be public intellectual still faces tenure review, competition for student enrollment, and strict disciplinary boundaries that determine what gets published and who gets promoted, all of which punish or at least discourage the broad and often boundary-testing work of the public intellectual.

This hostile environment provides few opportunities for intellectuals to support democratic life. It also offers little support, training, or development for those wishing to leave and pursue positions outside of the academy. The message is clear and frequently heard: if you leave, you are a failure. Further once they leave the academy, they often find themselves in positions isolated from their former life and they also often find themselves in anti-intellectual work cultures. Those who remain find it difficult to make connections with those outside of the academy and ironically find themselves also in stifled and narrow work cultures. In short, the professional circles of intellectuals working in and outside academia rarely intersect, and each is deprived of the chance to learn from the other. Academic intellectuals and institutions grow more and more introverted and estranged from the broader public, while non-academic intellectuals and the general public are cut off from the opportunity to take part in the intellectual life and resources that higher education institutions could offer.

This is a problem. It is a problem for academic intellectuals, cut off from the wider world and the pressing questions that face us as a society. It is a problem for non-academic intellectuals, cut off from the resources and people that could strengthen and give voice to their work. And ultimately it is a problem for all of us. As Thomas Jefferson once observed: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be.” We are split between a stifled academic culture on one side and an anti-intellectual work culture on the other -- and the work of democracy is falling into the void in between. Without a culture that supports public intellectual work, we will continue down a path where political and social debate, campaigns, movements, and policy-making are based on opinion, ignorance, and propaganda rather than honest study, careful reflection, and intellectual integrity.

The vocations group seeks to build a culture that supports public intellectual work, in and outside the academy, and to support others doing the same. We seek to take down the barriers that keep intellectuals from working in public, that keep people from all professions and walks of life from working as intellectuals, and that keep intellectual work from playing its critical central role in helping democratic ways of life flourish and grow.

The conclusions drawn from the statement above has lead us to the following more concrete tasks:

1. Shorter term, treating the symptom:
 - a. Help academics connect with a larger public
 - b. Help independent scholars build intellectual community and connect with university resources
2. Longer term, addressing the underlying problem:
 - a. (undergraduate education) Finally hop off the rusty see-saw between liberal and vocational aims in undergraduate education. We should embrace an integration of both aims, while insisting on a robust vision of vocation as democracy-enacting public work (Harry Boyte), and as intellectual-ethical-existential quest (Chris Higgins).
 - b. (graduate education) envision new forms of graduate education and academic socialization.