WHAT IS "PUBLIC" ABOUT WHAT ACADEMICS DO?

An exchange with Robert Kingston and Peter Levine

David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, *asked Robert Kingston, editor of the* Kettering Review, *and Peter Levine, a Research Scholar at the University of Maryland's Institute for Philosophy & Public Life, to explore their differences concerning what is meant by "public scholar" and "public-making" as those concepts have been developed in recent years in the pages of* HEX *and elsewhere.*

Brown: Would both of you try your hand at clarifying what a "public scholar" is or should be?

Kingston: Your question is particularly intriguing, since so many of us use the term without noting whether it is a technical term or a term of art — and certainly without reference to any commonly understood definition. I guess that, for me, the beast has two characteristics that are of importance. First, I take it for granted that the scholar is highly trained in the practice of a particular intellectual discipline — that is to say, a kind of choreography of the mind that determines his or her way of looking at and reprising what is seen in the world around — as well as a particular body of knowledge that seems to make his or her characteristic style of "dancing" work more easily with some orchestras than others.

But said scholar, thus equipped, is also a citizen who lives in the world with other people who are variously affected (in the obvious Deweyian sense) by actions undertaken by any one of them or any group of them. Thus our "public scholar" *becomes* a public scholar on the occasions and to the degree that he or she uses that professional way of thinking and body of knowledge in a manner that is directly helpful to fellow citizens who are confronting (with the scholar) a societal problem that affects them all, although not all in the same way.

The public scholar is not an *expert* who brings particular knowledge and a particular discipline to design or apply a specific, functioning *solution* to a given problem but one whose cast of mind and occasionally relevant knowledge of detail can enrich a

shared or "public" understanding of the dilemma in which our lives happen to be passing. A public scholar, I guess, is thus on a par with a public plumber or a public garbage collector, or a public senator at a town meeting or public forum!

Levine: I'd like to avoid using the term, "public scholar" (which originated with John Dewey and C. Wright Mills) to describe authors who are popular and accessible and reach large audiences. There's nothing wrong with being a best-selling author or a TV commentator, but people who are attracted to Dewey and Mills have something else in mind.

I don't yet have a general definition of "public intellectual," but I can think of three examples of the kind of work I mean.

Brown: For you "public scholar" and "public intellectual" are interchangeable for purposes of this discussion?

Levine: That's right.

Brown: OK, please go ahead.

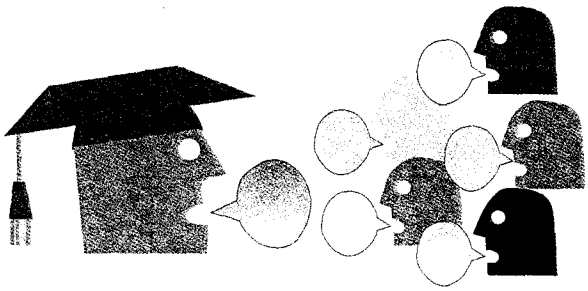
Levine: The first kind of work I have in mind is community-based research. This is work that involves a genuine collaboration between professional scholars and a concrete collection of other people. For example, we are beginning a project in Prince Georges County, Maryland, that aims to determine the effects of one's physical location on healthy behaviors (specifically, nutritious eating, and exercise). This is a scientific research project involving an interdisciplinary team at the university. The intention is to create generalizable results, so that planners and others will be able to see whether communities can best reduce obesity by getting rid of fast-food outlets; or by attracting healthy restaurants; or by making grocery stores accessible by foot; or by clustering food stores near parks (etc). Our project happens to be public scholarship because a group of nonscholars — in this case, high school students — helped us identify the topic and will help us to think about what variables probably affect their own behavior. They will also collect street-level data using Palm Pilots, and will learn to construct maps and graphs of value to neighbors. It's this collaboration between professional researchers and nonprofessional community members that makes the research "public."

The second kind of work I have in mind involves participation in campaigns and social movements. Over the years, I have played small roles in nonpartisan political movements for campaign finance reform, civic education, civic renewal, digital media reform, public journalism, civil investing, youth voting,

and deliberative democracy. Each of these movements has united existing organizations in fairly formal coalitions. Coalition members have discussed, negotiated, and sometimes deliberated about tactics, strategies, goals, and values. Professional scholars hardly ever lead such movements, but they can help by introducing relevant research findings, writing for various audiences, and organizing activities within the academy (which is itself a powerful social institution).

The third kind of work involves research about social issues, communities, or institutions. This would describe most research in the social sciences, the professional schools, and the humanities. What makes some such work "public" is the presence of a real dialogue between the scholar and those studied. A literary critic who writes about contemporary Southern fiction is an intellectual. She is a public intellectual if she is eager for contemporary Southern novelists to read her criticism, if she writes in a way that will interest them, and if she listens to their responses and uses their conversations to inform her own work.

Kingston: Peter, I respect your caution toward defining a "public intellectual" and wish I had a more cautious disposition myself. You seem to suggest that a scholar may become a "public intellectual" when he chooses to join with and put his scholarship at the service of a broader public. This may be done, you explain, in the context of community problems, political campaigns or social movements, and — especially if he is a social scientist — through academically acceptable research that entails "a real dialogue" between the scholar and the issues, communities, or institutions that he is studying. Your "public scholar," therefore, exists in something akin to an anthropologist's relationship to a community being studied. And these contexts suggest that the scholar will work *publicly* only in relatively small or localized communities and on contemporary problems, and that he will work only within his familiar academic frame of reference, as a scholar.



Now all of these instances represent to me thoroughly acceptable patterns for scholars to trace in the worlds in which

they live. Yet what troubles me in moving toward a definition from these examples is that they all seem to place primacy on what the scholar may offer toward solving or clarifying a public dilemma *through application of specialized, or expert, knowledge,* rather than by participation, *inter pares,* in sharing the burden of that dilemma. Thus you do not seem to think that scholars necessarily have the obligation to contribute to society as public intellectuals but rather as experts; and you clearly infer that those whose trained scholarly attention is drawn toward circumstances of other than contemporary life would be likely to find the call to this kind of "public" scholarship less than persuasive.

This endangers what I think of as the obligation of scholars and teachers — and especially of scholars who *are* teachers — to present their work in the context of an acute and necessarily expressed concern for the realities of contemporary social and political life. For you, the public intellectual is someone who can offer to the problems of contemporary life some practically, socially useful, professional skills — and is prepared to do so; I incline, rather — and perhaps this is a mere fantasy — to imagine someone who values his or her scholarship and brings its discipline to bear *always* on challenges of the polity and the society in which that knowledge is being pursued. I'm not suggesting that, if I were a scholar of Old English literature, I should currently be churning out little papers on, for example, "Preemptive Feminism: the Politics of Grendel's Mother"! Suchlike attempts to dress the past in anachronistic scanties of the contemporary world make me distinctly uneasy. But I would not read *Beowulf,* or *King Lear,* or the second book of *Paradise Lost* — and I certainly would not teach them — if I did not think and could not demonstrate that they had a direct bearing on *my* understanding of U.S. foreign policy at the present time. As Jefferson observed, the world belongs always to the living generation; and that world includes all of the world's literature. So it should be taught; and being learned, it should inform practical judgments of the present.

Levine: Bob, I think of a "public intellectual" as someone who joins a group or community and tries to help, or even prod, that concrete collection of people to become self-reflective and thoughtful about their own problems and interests; conscious of their own opportunities, choices, limitations, and tradeoffs; aware of their disagreements and the reasons for them; and capable of "political" action (broadly understood). To me, this is not applying expertise, but rather "sharing a burden" with the public (in your words).

Offering professional facts or opinions can advance these goals. For example, if a scholar writes an editorial about some public problem, this may help a community to become self-aware and may modestly increase the chance that citizens will act politically. However, I am much more interested in other ways of helping communities understand themselves and to become politically effective. Specifically, I admire efforts to organize collective projects of research or deliberation in which nonscholars play leading roles. When scholars assist or lead communities in such projects, they may be guided by their own disciplinary training. For instance, I'm working with social scientists who use computers to represent human geography; this is a powerful tool that communities can use to become more self-aware. Using methods developed by geographers, groups of citizens can pose their own questions, collect street-level data, and see illuminating visual representations of their environment.

"There are, however, real risks and tradeoffs involved in the effort to become more public."

There are, however, real risks and tradeoffs involved in the effort to become more public. As I've said before, public scholarship is not simply a good idea; it's a promising idea that involves serious costs and dangers. In community-based research, one can easily exploit community members by failing to give them true leadership roles, instead using them for labor and legitimacy. On the other hand, one can genuinely share responsibility and power, and end up with substandard research as a result. (Specifically, the research results may be invalid or may not be generalizable.)

In addition, public intellectuals who engage in social movements can become overly strategic, looking for useful arguments rather than seeking the truth. And finally, a "public intellectual," cannot study the distant past, because partnerships with dead people are impossible; yet historical research is extremely important. Finally, public scholarship cannot concern very large-scale phenomena, even though we need research on the macro scale. Note that I never said all scholars should be public intellectuals; I just think we need some more of them.

Kingston: Peter, your "public intellectual" is no different from other individual citizens who, by some accident of training, experience, or personality, are able to encourage others to exercise the responsibilities that should engage *every* citizen. Yet your special kind of public scholar still remains self-consciously engaged in "legitimate" scholarly research in the public context, primarily the *local* public context.

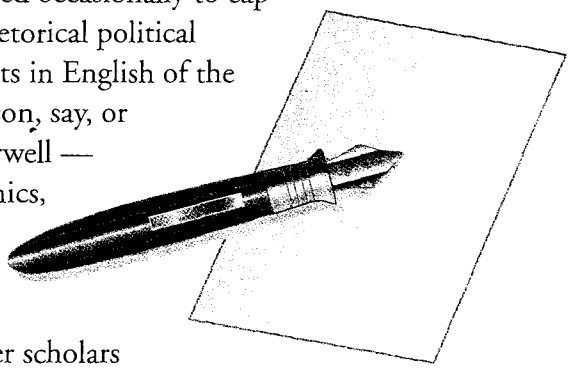
My public scholars, on the other hand, are those who would more often introduce the fruits of their scholarship *into* public dialogue than expect scholarly findings to be drawn *out of* such dialogue. Some scholars — the practitioners of university extension under the auspices of land grant colleges tend to be useful examples — may, in fact, both use and add to their research while engaging as fellow citizens with their peers; but my public scholar is preeminently the scholar whose historical research and concern with large-scale phenomena are readily brought to bear on contemporary dilemmas. More than that, he or she has the peculiar opportunity to bring into the public dialogue, as though they represented personal experience, the outcomes of historical research and "research on the macro scale."

Physicist or philosopher, artist or anthropologist, the scholar's *academic* experience has supposedly generated an understanding of more than common breadth — useful at least in some contexts. If that is in fact the case, then it would be a pity to caution — as I think Peter does — *against* the public scholar whose eyes focus high, whose reach is broad, whose voice carries afar on the air (or cable).

Brown: Bob, I take it then that you would like Peter to reconsider the distinction he makes between scholars who work on local issues and those who enter dialogue with the nation as a whole.

Kingston: The distinction that I think is important is not between the scholars who help out with local problems (as Peter seemed to be recommending) and those who pontificate on broader national (or international) issues. The distinction that I would emphasize is, rather, that between those who *work* on issues (whether local or not) and those who *"enter dialogue,"* whether with a nation or the county or the town or the village or whatever other name one wants to give to the community of shared, collective interest. That is what comes to my mind when I think of "public scholarship" — and to be so engaged means working toward a political judgment and, therefore, working with other people in the hopes that, together with them, a public judgment may be found. For this reason, I'm inclined to be mistrustful of an emphasis on faculty at work on their specialized interest within the local community; and I very much approve of those scholars who take the trouble to talk — yes, and even to publish — their own opinions, as citizens, on matters that are political and come before citizens for their political judgments. For that reason, I think a

public scholar may be obliged occasionally to cap scholarly findings with a rhetorical political judgment. The great essayists in English of the past 300 years — Dr. Johnson, say, or Ruskin, and on through Orwell — were scholars, if not academics, and their example may be worth emulation.



Levine: Bob and I don't disagree about whether scholars should offer their own informed opinions in public. Engaging in debates (as a speaker and listener) exemplifies deliberation. Our public discourse would be much poorer if academics and other intellectuals failed to speak publicly in their own distinctive voices. Sometimes their comparative advantage is indeed breadth of vision, as Bob says.

However, I have wanted to draw attention to a different kind of work: not engaging in public debates on one's own behalf, but rather increasing other people's capacity for deliberation and political action. This is the kind of work that I would like to call "public scholarship." A public scholar, in this sense, takes direct responsibility for creating public dialogues or opportunities for public learning.

"A public scholar ... takes direct responsibility for creating public dialogues..."

I do not think such work is necessarily more important than expressing one's own opinions. But building civic capacity is harder to do well, so we ought to spend some time thinking about how best to do it. Furthermore, it is poorly rewarded in academia. There are all kinds of incentives for making influential arguments to large audiences, but there are few rewards for direct work in "public-building" (which must often be done entirely behind the scenes, with a minimum of grandstanding). Finally, building civic capacity fills a practical gap that is left by other forms of public engagement. If one makes an argument on the op-ed page of the *New York Times,* there is not much chance that anyone will act in response to it, unless people already have civic competence and capacity. Thus I think that some intellectuals, some of the time, ought to work explicitly on "public-building." This means setting aside their own policy objectives and working to empower non-scholars as researchers and political agents.

Brown: Building civic capacity, as you put it, Peter, is sometimes referred to as "public-making," which is a concept that Bob has said needs some clarification about what it embraces and what

it is designed to effect. Does building such capacity start with how students are educated?

Kingston: It seems to me that "public-making" is problematic, at least when it challenges scholars, particularly, to perform this function from within their institutions in which it is, for most of them, the last thing they think of themselves as doing. The professor, after all, acts as though his or her commitment is to producing future professors. Although he or she might acknowledge that at least the more liberal parts of a university education have historically been assumed to assist in the development of good citizens, the professor never for one moment assumes that the master of science or doctor of philosophy degree toward which his students are pointed is in any context assumed to be a measure of citizenship. So the mere phrase "public-making" doesn't help us very far toward a more practical concern with how to do it in the university.

Frankly, I don't share the sense of some of my colleagues that the "forum method," the deliberative approach to pedagogy itself, is important. In fact, I'm rather nervous about that idea. I do think that most students within the university are in an apprentice stage. I do think that professors have some things that they must communicate and some particular disciplines in which they must exercise their students — just as, more obviously, the athletics coach knows very clearly who is doing the training and who is being trained for what particular end. That, I think, is the fundamental nature of the university. "Public-making" is a subject for living, not for teaching; but the university could be a wonderful place for learning how to live — if the faculty had learned it themselves.

Eventually, the most important *public* questions turn out to be unanswerable questions, with an understanding of which we are required to live, in a world among others who persist in understanding them differently. I suspect that to pursue that goal, we need to spend more time, as academic planners, focusing on the parts of our students' lives that are not presumed to be encapsulated within the subject matter of academic disciplines. Many years ago, a very old professor at a very old university insisted to me "it doesn't matter what you study, as long as you study it thoroughly, deeply, and know your way about it well." I wasn't sure at the time whether that was profound wisdom or silly twaddle. Nor am I now! But I do think that the subjects we study, at least on the threshold of the academic world in our undergraduate lives, are of no importance in themselves. Their importance has to do with the

way in which we apprehend the world within which and about which they are presented as relevant. I suppose that I was so deeply buried in the humanities, from very early in my life — in years that I can scarcely even remember as a child — that I really do take education to be designed primarily to teach us fallen creatures, who are political animals, how to behave socially. I taught literature with that conviction; I think I would have taught with similar motives had I been a physicist.

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Properly to serve a democratic society, the teaching university may have to change its culture. And I recognize that changing a culture takes a long, long time. I don't believe that a few community colleges sponsoring community forums represents a change in the culture of higher education, although theirs may be a useful activity for institutions to undertake. And I don't believe that a few deliberative forums in the classroom represent a change in the culture of higher education (and, in fact, I'd much rather they *not* be in the classroom). A change in the culture will only follow a changed understanding of what the democratic society of the twenty-first century is all about.

Levine: But I think it should be pointed out that the culture of American universities is not uniform; rather, it is passionately contested. There are concepts of the university as an economic engine; as a provider of skills that are valued by the job market; or even as a finishing school. There are colleges that aim to nurture intellectual skills in individual students through skillful and dedicated teaching.

There is also the model of highly professionalized research institutions, in which professors and graduate students are mainly accountable to international experts in their own fields; their duty is to generate knowledge. Scholars see production of public goods (such as scientific knowledge) as a form of "good citizenship." Students, for their part, benefit from exposure to professional work on unanswered questions. They are not simply told about historical knowledge, for example; they watch it being generated and wrestle with live questions. I find this model more attractive than many people in the Kettering community probably do. It is an ideal that is under considerable economic pressure, especially in areas (such as the humanities and basic sciences) where research lacks market value.

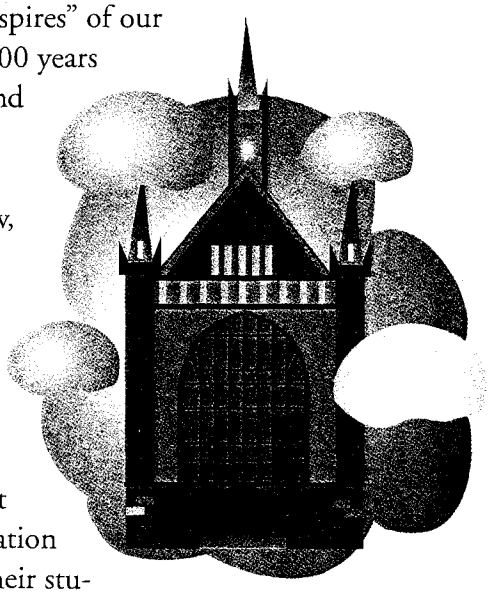
Another model is that of the "engaged university," which works with citizens, supports civic culture and civil society, and trains its own students to be effective members of democratic

communities. Clearly, this model is not dominant, although it does prevail in certain institutions, from Portland State University to Wagner College in New York. It has deep roots in the land grant movement, as Scott Peters' research has revealed; and today it has a major influence on projects like the living-learning communities that I described earlier.

All these models have been in conflict for a long time. If anything, I think interest in the "engaged university" is growing, albeit slowly.

Kingston: Let us hope you are right! And certainly you are right about the range of somewhat differently focused institutions of higher education in our country today. You yourself, Peter, add to the luster of a distinguished research institution that does the very things you have outlined earlier in this exchange. In my mind, you are a remarkable group there, in that you perform genuine public service in your research.

Yet I wonder if the differences between our various institutions are, in fact, as significant (or as encouraging) as we sometimes like to think. There is irony in the recognition that many centuries ago, when the medieval university was a religious institution and an ivory tower, its proper business was thought to be with both religion and society, to be both "political" and in fact politically engaged. The "dreaming spires" of our pseudo-gothic institutions a mere 200 years ago housed very worldly dreams. And if the institution was turned into a more reticent fairyland by self-satisfied and retiring scholars in the "low, dishonest" decades (to borrow a thought from W.H. Auden) of the last century, before the European hegemony dissolved, yet the seeds of social discontent and political dissent were still being nurtured there, even then. I am not confident that our institutions of higher education today adequately urge the lives of their students (and of their faculties) toward an understanding of the responsibilities that citizens have for self-government. Ours is a world where individual "selves" are hard to hear so political parties are bound rather to the wheels of *interest* than to the promise of a *public good.* The university increasingly prepares its students for the



pursuit of self-interest, as the oddly, oxymoronic intent of our American democracy.

Levine: But I would point out that colleges and universities are widely experimenting with approaches to "public-making" that go beyond the formal academic curriculum. There is community-based research, which I described earlier. There is a huge amount of service-learning, which (at its best) involves students in both political action and serious, guided reflection. There are opportunities for students to participate in the governance of colleges and universities — although we know too little about the effects of such participation. At my university, students in certain dormitories work collectively for several years on a single public problem. In one dormitory, the problem always has a scientific dimension; in another, there's a strong emphasis on service-learning. Such purposive residential communities are increasingly common. Experiments with deliberation also belong on this list, although I agree with Bob that they are just one tool among many.

"In ordinary usage, the word 'public' has no evaluative significance...."

Brown: Another question comes to mind: What distinguishes "public-making" from what most people think of as "community-building?"

Levine: I would define a "community" as an aggregation of people who have some sense of belonging together, of "we-ness." For its members, a community is not merely a means to various ends that they possessed before they joined; rather, its maintenance and flourishing are intrinsic values. Not all communities are geographical — Jews, for instance, have formed a dispersed community for 2,000 years.

"Community development" either means (1) increasing the sense of "we-ness" — of belonging and cohesion — in a group of people; or else (2) helping such a group to "develop" economically or socially. The second definition can actually have very little to do with social or psychological connectedness; it can simply mean promoting economic growth at the micro scale rather than in a national economy.

In ordinary usage, the word "public" has no evaluative significance — it means any large group of people, whether they are engaged or apathetic, wise or idiotic. But in John Dewey's idiosyncratic lexicon, a "public" is a group of citizens who have developed the capacity to define, debate, learn, and collectively address social problems. Thus "public-making" presumably means increasing such capacity. I happen not to be very communitarian,

so for me, increasing group cohesion is not an animating goal. But I am taken by the goal of "making publics."

Kingston: Peter and I are in sympathy here, I think. Whenever we focus on rhetoric about "the community," we tend mostly to be slipping into a nostalgic predetermination about the nature of an ideal polity where, despite different personal opinions, all of its residents can readily arrive at harmonious conceptions of community stasis in almost a communitarian sense. Now there's something odd about that — because such communities are a rapidly diminishing phenomenon; and they diminish largely because they are less appealing and less successful today than we pretend they were 100 years ago. So the civic task that challenges the contemporary democracy is not to "build community" in the sense that nineteenth-century America understood, but to "make a public." In effect, we nowadays have to make a public in order to provide for a "community" — a community that is no longer primarily the geographic kind of "community" that people have in mind when they invoke the (to me) outmoded term, "community-building." The focus, therefore, needs to be first, not on improving "my" community, desirable as that may be, but on generating public will to reach judgment in heterogeneous communities of citizens; then to act collectively.

"So the civic task that challenges the contemporary democracy is not to 'build community' in the sense that nineteenth-century America understood, but to 'make a public.'"

Brown: That's very helpful, Bob. Now let me wind this up by reminding Peter that he has said that underlying both public scholarship and public-making is an assumption that participatory and deliberative democracy is important, but he also asked the provocative question "What if citizens generally don't want to get involved?"

Levine: I take seriously the goal of helping to increase the public's capacity for self-rule. I want to be part of concrete, practical efforts to do so. Thus I care to what degree Americans are willing or eager to adopt responsibilities such as deliberating or forming institutions. If, for example, John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse are correct in their book *Stealth Democracy* (which argues that Americans have very little desire to deliberate), this will make life difficult and necessitate more complex and arduous approaches than would be needed if Americans were yearning to participate civically. Finding out that Americans deeply dislike civic engagement wouldn't change my own goals; I would still *want* them to participate. But it would force me to choose certain tactics rather than others. I might, for example, devote more

attention to civic education at the primary level and less effort to increasing opportunities for public participation in formal politics. In fact, this describes the trajectory of my professional career. I started at Common Cause, seeking to open doors to participation. Now I work mainly on civic education at the kindergarten to twelfth grade level, hoping that young people can be made more interested in walking through any doors to civic engagement that are open.

Brown: Bob, I'll let you have the last word...

Kingston: I do accept that today most of our fellow citizens do not want to get involved. I believe that it is always easier not to think and that we often don't begin to think until something threatens us, as individuals, dreadfully. I don't doubt that, in the first democracy, some of the Athenian slaves wished that they were citizens who could participate in the democracy in which they lived; but equally, some of those eligible to participate in that democracy probably preferred not to do so and many were even relieved, no doubt, when the democracy in which they were expected to participate ceased to function. Being civilized — being prepared to deliberate with un-alike others — continues to be an uphill struggle.

Institutions of higher education — of which we have a healthy variety nowadays as Peter has reminded us — provide ideally a space where most of us *might* first learn to engage in that struggle. And a space where some of us — scholars — who choose it for life, may continue to engage effectively. But a university preoccupied with the mechanics of course and grade, the glitter of scholarship as means of self-advancement, and the provision of service by the unskilled to the misunderstood — tends not to be such space.

I do not believe that there is anything more important than learning how to become an effective democratic citizen. (And please understand that I do not think of that as at all the same thing as learning to be a "good American" citizen.) It is because "participatory and deliberative democracy is important" but "citizens generally don't want to get involved" that public scholarship and public-making could be the first and the ultimate purposes of our institutions of education in this would-be deliberative democracy of ours.

Brown: Thank you, Bob. Thank you, Peter.