# Should Political Science Have a Civic Mission? An Overview of the Historical Evidence

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Like many organizations, the American Political Science Association has taken the dawn of the new millennium as an opportunity to reevaluate its institutional mission. At APSA's 2000 annual meeting, the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) presented to the APSA Council its final report on "the overall condition of the Association relative to its mission and to the key challenges and opportunities in the external environment" (among other things). Interestingly, the SPC acknowledges that when first asked to "view the future of the APSA through the prism of its organizational mission and objectives," it was "surprised to learn that the Association had no explicit mission statement beyond its purpose, in the original words of its Constitution, 'to encourage the study of Political Science' " (<www.apsanet.org/new/planning/finalreport.cfm>). Accordingly, the Committee decided to craft an APSA mission statement suitable for the twenty-first century.

According the Strategic Planning Committee, one of APSA's central purposes should be "serving the public, including disseminating research and preparing citizens to be effective citizens and political participants" (<www.apsanet.org/new/planning/councilreport.cfm>). The decision to include a civic component in our new mission statement not only builds on the work done by the APSA Task Force on Civic Education since its founding in 1996, but also explicitly acknowledges what has always been one of the underlying purposes of political science. As the APSA website reminds us, "education for civic engagement and responsive governance were founding objectives of the political science profession at the beginning of the 20th century and remain essential for the 21st century" (<www.apsanet.org/CENnet/>).

By reminding the political science community of the important role it has always played in America's civic education, APSA adds an important voice to an ongoing national conversation about the proper relationship between higher education and public life in American democracy. Indeed, in light of political changes over the last several years, a wide array of individuals and institutions has joined what has become a national call for a reevaluation of the purposes of higher education. That is to say, as Bill Richardson put it in 1996, "higher education played a major role—albeit a discreet one—in winning the Cold War." Now that "we've won the war . . . one of the critical challenges for higher education is to redirect our knowledge and our resources" into effectively dealing with today's most pressing problems (2).

Thus, a group of distinguished college and university presidents convened to issue the by now well-known "Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education" (Ehrlich 1999). This document called for the creation of a "national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education," so that our colleges and universities will once again become "vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy." An expanded group met again in June 2000 to pursue this agenda further(see <www.compact.org/plc/>), and their work continues.

Considering these important civic movements both within our particular discipline and within higher education in general, I have constructed a brief historical analysis of the relationship between higher education and public life over the course of American history. American colleges and universities have always served civic purposes and have traditionally done so in accordance with the larger needs of American politics and public life. Tracing over time the relationship between higher education and public life, I elucidate three basic models of how higher education has served civic purposes, and I also situate the development of political science within that larger history. In so doing, I delineate that American higher education serves several distinct civic purposes, including the training of public leaders, the development of critical thinking to help prepare citizens for democratic governance, and the dissemination of knowledge to help solve public problems.

## From Christian Commonwealth to Democratic Civil Society: The Development of the Congregational Colleges

The original model of American higher education was the congregational college, an institutional form originally designed to serve the civic necessities of the early "Christian commonwealths." In the seventeenth century, American settlers founded many small, religiously homogeneous communities located in a variety of different areas of the "New World," and many of these communities established their own congregational colleges. These institutions provided future community leaders with the knowledge and mentality considered necessary for public figures. Thus, in the congregational colleges, higher education was directly connected to public life.

The nature of colonial society directly affected the types of community leaders produced by the congregational colleges. For example, because the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay colony wanted a unified community devoted to serving God, they founded Harvard College to train the ministers (and others) needed to govern their Christian commonwealth. Although the Puritans drew a conceptual distinction between church and state, in practice the sacred and the civic were very much interconnected (Kramnick and Moore 1997). Consequently, the minister was central to public life. As the leader in the holy realm, he educated his congregation about religious issues and so reinforced the common values that underlay community life. However, he also executed more explicitly civic functions as well. For example, he was the "chief molder of public opinion" on political matters, and he operated as the main emissary between his community and the larger world, using his own home as a meeting place when dignitaries from other communities came to visit. Moreover, he functioned as a public intellectual, turning his pri-

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vate collection of books into a community library (Tucker 1974, 15–16). Thus, the colonial minister served as a vital and important public leader, embodying the Christian commonwealth's juxtaposition of the sacred and the civic.

As public life changed over the course of the colonial period, the congregational college adapted to new circumstances. The first colleges were unidenominational because each community prescribed to one particular set of religious values. Harvard was founded by the Massachusetts Puritans in 1636, William and Mary by the Virginia Anglicans in 1693, and Yale College by the Connecticut Congregationalists in 1701. However, over the course of the eighteenth century, isolated communities increasingly came into contact with each other, and a culturally heterogeneous and religiously pluralistic civil society began to develop. A multicongregational college arose in order to better serve this increasingly pluralistic society.

Princeton College exemplifies this new model. Founded in 1746, it was the first college chartered in a province with no established church, was the first to receive no state aid and to remain free of state control, and was the first to have intercolonial rather than exclusively local influences. Although deeply influenced by its Presbyterian founders, Princeton was hospitable to students from a variety of sects (Hofstadter and Metzger 1955, 139). As American public life was more diverse, institutions like Princeton College emerged to accommodate the country's evolution.

Throughout the colonial period (and beyond), the congregational college model of higher education served three important civic purposes. First, the congregational colleges produced community leaders. Second, they gave those leaders the type of knowledge considered necessary for those responsible for public affairs. More specifically, the traditional curriculum of the congregational colleges combined the great works of Christian theology with classic works of civic humanism. Embracing a "unity of truth," these Christian educators accepted the "notion that humanistic classical learning and rhetoric best prepared a man for public life" (Bender 1997, 129), but they interpreted humanist works through a Christian lens (Reuben 1996, 18). Third, the congregational colleges educated future leaders with a curriculum of Christian humanism because they saw normative thinking as central to the process of public decision making.

As the American Revolution approached, American public life progressed and the congregational colleges again adapted accordingly. Although the colleges continued to produce public leaders, these leaders less often filled the pulpits and more often planned the Revolution (Marsden 1994; Tucker 1974). In keeping with this secular trend, moral philosophy and natural theology became increasingly independent of Christian theology (Reuben 1996, 18–19). Educators introduced into the traditional curriculum more explicitly civic subjects, such as political philosophy, current political controversies, and Enlightenment ideas (Hofstadter and Metzger 1955, 204; Reuben 1996, 19). Finally, while the congregational colleges continued to teach future leaders the kind of normative thinking they would need for making public decisions, educators now encouraged students to exercise their own personal judgments rather than simply to absorb accepted "truths" (Hofstadter and Metzger 1955, 152)—a pedagogical method more appropriate for an increasingly democratic public.

## Higher Education in Early Republican America: The Creation of the Civic University

After the American Revolution, a new secularized model of higher education emerged: the civic university. This model includes both the Jeffersonian prototype—the University of Virginia—as well as the land-grant "people's colleges," founded in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The civic universities continued to serve the three civic purposes traditionally embraced by the congregational colleges—the production of public leaders, the dissemination of important knowledge, and the development of the type of normative, reflective thinking considered necessary for good public decision-making—however, they also added two new civic purposes to the traditional list. First, the civic universities opened their doors to a student body comprising more than just elite men, thus increasing public access and beginning the democratization of higher education. Second, rather than simply nurturing the reflective capacities of students, the civic universities pioneered the idea of applying higher education to practical public problems.

The civic university was created to respond to the new set of public problems that emerged after the Revolution. During this time, the former colonists wrote and ratified a secular constitution and superimposed it upon their pluralistic yet predominantly Protestant society. However, the First Amendment's innovative federal separation of church and state did not immediately apply to state and local governments (Sandel 1996). Nevertheless, the ratification of a secular Constitution was extremely radical, and also troubling to many Americans (Kramnick and Moore 1997). Coming to the fore were the public problems of maintaining "virtue" without a common religion, of rendering the populace capable of self-government, and of securing the fragile new democracy.

Thomas Jefferson saw the civic university as a central part of the solution to these new public problems. Like Rousseau, Jefferson believed that a secular state must provide citizens with a common set of democratic values to replace traditional religion, and that higher education should aid in transmitting these secular values not only to public leaders but also to ordinary citizens (Cremin 1980, 109). To serve these civic purposes, Jefferson in 1819 founded the University of Virginia, the first state-sponsored university without an official religious affiliation (Hofstadter and Metzger 1955, 240).

Nevertheless, Jefferson's new model of the civic university did not immediately render obsolete the congregational college model. To the contrary, the early nineteenth century brought a rapid proliferation of religious colleges that were closely linked to communities that maintained their religious foundations (Marsden 1994). Most citizens wanted their sons to be educated locally, and having a local college became a key contributor to civic pride. However, because communities tended to be religiously homogeneous, the expansion of locally rooted colleges also reinforced communities' denominational temperaments. Thus, in keeping with the congregational college model, these institutions functioned as both "centers of a vigorous religious life" and as "manufactories of republicanism" (Cremin 1980, 67). Although many of these "colleges" were actually more like glorified high schools, communities viewed institutions of higher education as essential to public life in the early nineteenth century (Hofstadter & Metzger 1955).

Despite the continued popularity of the traditional congregational colleges, the Jeffersonian prototype of the civic university contributed to the emergence of a new popular institutional form of higher education, the land-grant people's colleges. Following the path pioneered by the University of Virginia, land-grant institutions sought to democratize higher education by "breaking ecclesiastical control" of American colleges, "thus



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opening the way for a new education to be shaped in tune with the needs and wants of the common people of the nation" (Peters 1998, 9). Beginning in the 1830s, the land-grant movement reached fruition in 1862 with the passage of the Morrill Act, which sought to make higher education accessible to "the common people" (11). In fact, the Morrill Act was part of a growing educational reform movement, which called for a modernization of the rigid classical curriculum—more electives, emphasis on reflection over the absorption of pat "truths," and the inclusion of more contemporary and practical subjects—even at America's most elite colleges (Reuben 1996, 23–30).

This reform movement spurred the development of higher education by adding two new civic purposes to academia's repertoire. First, the land-grant colleges democratized higher education by establishing the principle of "free and open access," an ideal not fully achieved in practice (Peters 1998, 12). Second, the people's colleges championed the innovative idea that higher education should provide knowledge that would be useful to the democratic public (Boyte and Kari 1999, 15; Peters 1998, 14–16). However, the land-grant institutions did not dispense with the traditional humanistic curriculum that sought to nurture in students the capacity for reflection. Instead, the people's colleges supplemented this intellectual education with a more utilitarian agricultural and mechanical education that would enable students to return to their homes and engage in the practical "public work" of community problem solving (Boyte and Kari 1999, 15–16; Peters 1998, 26). In other words, civic universities promoted the active form of citizenship that characterized public life during the nineteenth century.

## The Birth of the Modern Research University

The third model of American higher education, the modern research university, departs markedly from both the congregational college and the civic university, and has significantly altered the face of higher education in America. Although these universities continue to produce public leaders, said leaders are now understood as primarily experts and professionals, rather than moral leaders or active citizens. Curricula most likely focus upon the natural and social sciences, rather than religion and the humanities. And while modern research universities maintain the tradition of instilling the mentality necessary for public decision making, an emphasis on scientific objectivity has eclipsed the customary focus on philosophical reflection.

Three watershed changes contributed to this monumental shift in the nature of higher education. First, industrialization, the creation of the railroads, and the expansion of the American market created the need for a "new American state" to regulate industry and commerce, as well as for professionals to staff the new state bureaucracies (Skowronek 1982). The modern research "universities became the linchpin of the entire complex of professions in the new order" (Ricci 1984, 48), as they undertook the task of producing the necessary experts and professionals. Second, American public life was concurrently becoming much more diverse than ever before, as was demonstrated by the active participation of women in moral reform and suffrage movements, the formal enfranchisement of African-American men, the emergence of modern class distinctions, the immigration of new ethnic and (non-Protestant) religious groups, and the increasingly radical struggles of populists and socialists. In the face of these conflicts and changes, social scientists hoped they could use the new knowledge generated within their disciplines to help resolve political disagreements and solve public problems in an objective way. Third, the birth of the modern research university must be contextualized within the late nineteenth century's broad-scale epistemological shift from philosophy and religion to the natural and social sciences (Reuben 1996). At the new universities, professors no longer focused exclusively on nurturing the reflective capacities of students, shaping their moral character, and passing on the legacy of moral "truths." Rather, enticed by the possibility of actually producing new knowledge, professors began specializing in particular areas in which they perhaps could generate original scholarship and eventually become experts.

The rise of the sciences and the new professions changed the way in which America's leaders understood the public and its problems. First, academia's shift from humanism to positivism both mirrored and reinforced the larger societal shift away from a philosophical and values-based understanding of public life (Sandel 1996) and toward a scientific and professional one (Boyte and Kari 2000). Indeed, "the decline of the classical curriculum signaled the exhaustion of the humanist ideal of a common civic culture" (Bender 1997, 131). At the same time, a variety of factors—such as the threat of popular mass movements, the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious, the rise of authoritarianism around the world, and the Scopes Trial at home—increased the elite's belief that ordinary people were incapable of governing themselves (a notion exemplified by Walter Lippman's famous essay on the "phantom public"). This condescending view of an ineffectual democracy aroused a major transition in the perception and practice of citizenship: The active, participatory "civic republican" and "public work" models of democracy gave way to the liberal, passive and consumerist notion of citizenship that eventually achieved hegemony over the course of the twentieth century (Boyte and Kari 2000; Sandel 1996).

## From Advocacy to Objectivity: The Development of Political Science

Originally, political science was a normative pursuit, inextricably linked to the field of moral philosophy. Even as it evolved into a social science, the discipline continued to pursue normative purposes. John W. Burgess, one of political science's founding scholars, believed that political science should be used to "prepare young men for the duties of public life" and for "all the political branches of public service" (Gunnell 1993, 51). Gunnell continues, "The vision of political science that developed in [the early years of] the American university was one that united the field with history and combined civic education and leadership training with a general commitment to the scientific rationalization of society" (1993, 37).

Early political scientists wanted to use their developing methodology for the betterment of society. In fact, it was this desire for civic engagement that led them to take a leadership role in the "good government" movement that developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Upset by widespread corruption and the incompetence of many political appointees, early political scientists concluded that the United States needed to produce a new class of civil servants who could use the insights of political science to help them govern for the public good. In fact, it was through their participation in the municipal reform movement that political scientists were able to establish their discipline (Silverberg 1998). These burgeoning political scientists vowed to "take the scientific lead in all matters of political interest," and in order to pursue this goal, they founded the Ameri-



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can Political Science Association in 1903 (Silverberg 1998, 171). It is important to note that despite this dedication to social science, in its early years the APSA continued to embrace a program of civic education and social reform.

However, political science, like the other social science disciplines, ended up moving away from its original goals of engaging in social science research—the "advocacy" of social reforms that would improve public life—and toward the twentieth century ideal of social scientific "objectivity" (Furner 1975). By 1915 political science had almost completely broken away from its traditional association with moral philosophy (Ricci 1984; Ross 1993). The acceleration toward objectivity increased as the social sciences began to take advantage of new funding opportunities offered by private foundations and the government, all of whom demanded impartiality (Smith 1994). The behavioral revolution of the 1950s further marginalized normative approaches within the discipline (Ricci 1984; Ross 1993). Consequently, the ideal of objectivity increasingly eclipsed the civic value of public engagement, and academic social science ended up deemphasizing its original civic purposes.

## The Emergence of the Cold War University

American politics and public life after World War II directly affected the evolution of the modern research university, which consequently developed in accordance with the imperatives of the Cold War (Bender 1997, 23; Sullivan 1999, 2). These universities, buoyed by a historically unprecedented influx of federal funding, became central players in the fight against communism while reinterpreting the civic purposes of democratic access and the dispersal of applied knowledge.

First, although academia's massive, federally funded postwar expansion led to the largest democratization of higher education in the history of the world, this expansion was justified by the Cold War imperative to ward off the "ideological appeal of communism" by spreading prosperity throughout the populace (Sullivan 1999, 3). Consequently, modern research universities began to pioneer the idea that higher education should serve the public by advancing the career goals of individual students, rather than by preparing them for civic participation. Second, the Cold War universities continued to focus on the practical application of higher learning, but the focus became serving economic and military needs, rather than providing citizens with the skills they needed to engage in "public work" (Boyte and Kari 2000). Thus, American higher education continued to prepare experts and professionals for leadership positions, yet students increasingly studied a "default" curriculum that stressed instrumental individualism, positivism, and the fact/value distinction (Sullivan 1999, 3), rather than maintaining the traditional emphasis on civic values and philosophical reflection.

## Where Do We Go From Here? American Higher Education After the Cold War

This brief historical narrative underlines the point that American colleges and universities have always served civic purposes and have traditionally done so in accordance with the larger needs of American politics and public life. However, with the end of the Cold War and the commencement of a new millennium, institutions of higher education must once again retool the ways in which they engage society. How can we teachers and political scientists best contribute to this necessary reconfiguration? How can we better prepare today's increasingly alienated young citizens for democratic governance? What important insights do we have to share with an American public that is increasingly "bowling alone" (Putnam 2000)? How should we reconfigure the traditional civic purposes of higher education—training leaders, providing knowledge, nurturing critical thinking, and using knowledge to solve public problems—for contemporary times?

While an historical survey suggests that higher education will inevitably adapt to changes in the larger society, contemporary academics would be well served by actively reminding American citizens of the public purposes we serve. In the current political climate—with its disengagement, culture wars and attacks on public institutions—colleges and universities increasingly find themselves under attack from a variety of fronts. Without a popularly accepted civic duty like winning the Cold War, higher education increasingly needs to justify its tenure system, its work culture, and its public funding to taxpayers who often have a very inaccurate understanding of what academics do. Being able to articulate a clear set of public purposes might help academia better navigate the challenges of our particular historical era. Consequently, APSA should not only explicitly embrace a civic mission—such as "serving the public, including disseminating research and preparing citizens for democratic governance"—but must also make sure that citizens at large understand what that mission is and why it is important for American public life in the new millennium.

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