

# THE ENGAGED UNIVERSITY:

An interview with Peter Levine

*David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, asked Peter Levine, a research scholar at the University of Maryland's Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, to explore the prospects for democratic deliberation and the scholar's role in such an undertaking. Levine is the author of The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy.*

**Brown:** Peter, you have argued that “we need intellectuals who contribute something distinctive to discussion and civic action in particular places or within specific organizations.” Could you develop that further here?

**Levine:** It's common to define a “public intellectual” as someone who has a large audience — someone who can speak effectively on television, for example. Academics worry that most of our tribe is too obscure and esoteric, so there's admiration (mixed, of course, with jealousy and suspicion) for those who can influence and entertain a mass audience. These famous scholars are called “public intellectuals.” But talking to large groups is no way to understand their concerns, nor does it promote deliberation, since members of a national audience cannot talk to one another. So I'd like us to reclaim the term “public intellectual” as it was used by John Dewey and C. Wright Mills, meaning someone who promotes deliberation and public work. That kind of contribution is possible only when one engages over a long period with a limited number of people and their concrete needs.

I'm not saying that we should completely shun mass communications. The national media obviously play an important role in deliberative democracy — and both Dewey and Mills experimented with them in interesting ways. I'm told that Mills *died* in part from the stress of preparing for a television appearance, and Dewey labored to create national publications that would transmit academic thought to a broad public. But this was not what made him a model of a public intellectual. Dewey derived many of his ideas from his sustained interactions with particular communities (for instance, through Hull House in Chicago); he contributed

knowledge that was useful to these local groups; and then he acquired national fame because of the strength of his thought. Striving deliberately for fame — which is what it means to seek a large audience — is a dangerous temptation for anyone who wants to promote deliberation and democracy.

**Brown:** If a “public intellectual” for you is someone who promotes deliberation and public work, are there current exemplars on your campus?

**Levine:** At the University of Maryland, my unsystematic explorations have revealed many public intellectuals, and I think this would be common at most institutions. Just to name a few examples, Professor Shenglin Chang and others in the Department of Natural Resource Sciences and Landscape Architecture convene public meetings to envision possible futures for blighted neighborhoods near the university. They then use advanced software to generate images of these alternatives for the public to continue to discuss and refine. The Communications Department runs a “Recovering Democracy Forum” whose purpose “is to encourage meaningful dialogue between citizens and candidates seeking election. Thus, the democracy forums bring together a diverse range of citizens with political candidates seeking election to discuss important issues and concerns and to create empowering conversation between the public and those who offer political leadership.” The Department of Criminal Justice is planning public forums on sentencing reform in the state. CIVICUS is a living-and-learning community for undergraduates who study democracy and civil society in the classroom and then design service projects. And I could easily name several more examples.

**Brown:** Who are the prime movers of these initiatives — faculty, or administration, or a public?

**Levine:** In most cases, faculty. I don’t think many ideas have come from the public, which is a problem. There is a need for community organizing in the sprawling, heterogeneous areas that surround our campus. A more organized public might press for more constructive participation by the university. Community organizing is a major objective for most of the public intellectuals inside the institution.

**Brown:** How do you go about fashioning new models of public scholarship in your own work?

**Levine:** I’ll give you an example. Harry Boyte (founder and codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship) and Paul

Resnick (a professor of Information Science at the University of Michigan) have argued for a new kind of Extension service for the twenty-first century, one that puts the tremendous technological capacities of universities — especially land grant, state universities — to work solving community problems, but in ways that communities want — under their direction. Harry has been heavily involved in an experimental project in St. Paul, Minnesota (the St. Paul Information Commons), which recruits immigrant kids to build a sophisticated neighborhood Web site with technical support from the University of Minnesota.

We have followed, by recently establishing a Prince Georges' Information Commons in the county that surrounds the University of Maryland. This is a learning and research experience for us at the university, as well as something of a public service. Colleagues at other universities are more than welcome to join us. The result could be a new kind of Extension service, built from the ground up, on democratic principles.

Right now, we are working with high school students to create a public Web site in service to the county. The students are gathering data about “community assets” to be presented on the Web site in technically sophisticated ways via interactive digital maps. There has been an interesting dialogue between the students, who view retail chain stores as major assets, and the adult organizers, who start with a list of assets that includes nonprofits and idiosyncratic, locally owned businesses. There has been a lot of learning on both sides.

**Brown:** So the “learning” led to a broader definition of “community assets”? With what consequences?

**Levine:** We're just getting started, so I can't point to many tangible consequences. But I have already been forced to explain (at least to myself) why I think that a whole-food co-op is an asset but a fast-food chain restaurant isn't. This is not self-evident to the kids, and it's good for me to have to think about my own values.

**Brown:** Some would argue that public advocacy, rather than public deliberation, seems to be the stance of many academics in their interactions with various publics. Their students are also prepared to assume the advocate role. Do you agree and, if so, what does such a stance say about the capacities of those publics and the nature of their participation in democratic life?

**Levine:** “I'm not sure that there is a clean distinction

*“I'm not sure that there is a clean distinction between advocacy and deliberation.”*

between advocacy and deliberation.” What does someone do when she deliberates, if not to advocate some position? We do want deliberators to listen as well as speak, and I suppose that some professors don’t value, practice, or teach listening skills as well as they should. Also, academics could set a conscious goal of promoting deliberation by various groups both inside and outside the university. But I think it would be a distortion of the university’s role if *most* professors became deliberation promoters, rather than proponents of their own views and positions.

Increasingly, I fear that public deliberation is a black box, a mysterious process to which we are supposed to entrust difficult normative issues because the deliberating public is sovereign. But what do citizen deliberators do once they face an issue? They propose and assess specific proposals and values. So coming out and saying what you think of an issue is not an alternative to deliberation; it is an example of it.

The political debate is too narrow (and too dominated by money), so there is a need for academics to participate. Think how much narrower our public discourse would be if all the people with college teaching jobs disappeared from television, radio, and the op-ed page. So I think we need advocates — even a few ideological pit bulls who happen to be college professors.

**Brown:** Isn’t the problem of advocacy that it assumes a somewhat settled mind rather than one that remains open with all that implies?

**Levine:** That’s a good point. I have worked with formal advocacy groups and noticed that their minds are very settled — partly because they occupy specific ideological niches, partly because there’s no time to think about fundamental issues when one is involved in a constant political battle, and partly because nuanced or shifting positions are hard to communicate through the mass media. I don’t think that engaged professors are typically *as fixed* in their views as professional advocates are. But I agree that we should aim for open-mindedness and listening skills.

**Brown:** I remember one of your comments at a workshop to the effect that “scholars aren’t that different” from citizens. Just



what did you mean?

**Levine:** I'm concerned about a type of rhetoric or analysis that distinguishes academics and experts from "real people," "ordinary Americans," "citizens," or "the public." In a complex, postindustrial society, most people are sometimes experts, yet the same people are often ordinary citizens. Like everyone else, academics are baffled by complex issues that are outside their field; they are mostly focused on private affairs, not public life; and they feel both powerless and economically insecure. Therefore, I don't think that professors differ from citizens systematically in their attitudes or behaviors.

Furthermore, making such a distinction can have perverse results. First of all, it can imply that professors should not directly say what they think about issues, because it is "the public's" job to deliberate. But if professors are part of the public, then their civic duty is to wade into the fray and defend their opinions publicly. Second, I think that the distinction between experts and citizens is always implicitly elitist, even though it can be offered with a populist intent. It implies that professors would fundamentally change a public debate if they were to join it. In my experience, this is not often the case. Third, I don't think it's very good politics to tell academics that they are not part of the public and that if they intervene, they may distort or suppress the public voice. This will produce a guilty silence, at best.

**Brown:** But academics are specially trained to use reason, critical reason. If they practice reason as teachers/educators, why shouldn't that role, that practice, be employed in public spaces? Why do they just become like everyone else?

**Levine:** Before, I was resisting the idea that professors are especially bad for public debate because they are arrogant and imposing. Now you're suggesting that they may be (or at least ought to be) especially good for deliberation, because of their reasoning skills. Actually, I wouldn't be surprised to find that, on average, academics do deliberate more and better than other citizens. We'll never know, since measuring the quality of deliberation is impossible. But I wouldn't expect academics to be a huge help, because there are no experts on moral questions.

**Brown:** Don't academics often shun debate in "local publics," instead preferring the relatively closed conversation with colleagues? Are many of them willing to be pragmatists allowing the interests of those publics to help determine the problems they

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should address in their academic work and peer review?

**Levine:** You're right; it is not very common for professors to engage in serious dialogue with local citizens about the direction their own research should take. In some cases, this is because they overlook what their neighbors and fellow citizens have to offer; they do not show proper respect for the people who pay their salaries. To some extent, it is because of incentives and rules that are beyond their control. For example, you can't get tenure for deliberating with your neighbors. And it is extremely unwise to do work that is not currently valued in your own professional disciplinary association, if you want to get a college teaching job.

But there is also a deeper question here about which topics "local publics" should help to understand. Are you implying that a scholar of Renaissance painting should allow the interests of a local public to determine the problems that she addresses in her own work? Why? Even if her neighbors *could* get up to speed on her subject and give her good advice, it is much more efficient for her to consult her fellow members of the College Art Association. If your view is that we shouldn't employ scholars of Renaissance painting at all — because their subject is of little value to a deliberating public — then you are more of an American pragmatist than I.

Since much of academic research does not have a direct or obvious link to deliberation, I wouldn't ask most professors to consult with local publics about the direction of their work. I would ask them to be good citizens when they are not doing their research, and to explain their work to anyone who wants to understand it, but not to deliberate about how to proceed as scholars.

Thus, my complaint is only against academics in fields of direct practical significance for local publics. *They* should take direction from their fellow citizens. Yet often they act in undemocratic and nondeliberative ways. For instance, a lot of professional economic advice is presented as if it were based on scientific certainty, when, in fact, economic issues always involve moral choices that economics cannot answer.

Still, the arrogance of economics is not a feature of academic life. There are nonacademic economists (consider Alan Greenspan); and there are academics who know nothing about economics. I even suspect that those economists who teach in universities are more aware of their discipline's limitations than those who work in the government or the private sector.

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Thus, at the very least, I would plead for a more nuanced, fine-grained comparison of academics to average citizens. Instead of throwing all professors together into a single category (and throwing them out with the bathwater), I would draw distinctions by discipline, by type of institution and career path, even by age and generation. It may be that some academics have implicitly antidemocratic or antideliberative tendencies, but surely not all of them.

**Brown:** What are some of those distinctions?

**Levine:** This is really a call to research — I don't have the answers. But I would suspect that there is a “democracy deficit” in many of the disciplines that apply quantitative social-science methods to train and advise practical professionals. (These fields range from accounting to urban studies.) Such methods appear to give answers to public problems, but they cannot address fundamental normative issues, which tend to get suppressed. I think the misuse of social science is less widespread in the core disciplines, where more scholars understand the limits of their methods, than in the applied fields.

Meanwhile, I think that in some of the arts and humanities, many intellectuals who see themselves as politically engaged have adopted such an adversarial stance toward mainstream American culture and institutions that they have cut themselves off from public debate. This might be an example of a generational phenomenon, since I think it applies most to scholars who attended graduate school in the 1960s and 1970s.

**Brown:** On another front, you have expressed your concern about the public accountability of universities, describing them as “economic and political powerhouses.” Could you explain why their “research, technology, and institutional management” should be “areas of concern for those who believe in the democratic purposes of higher education?”

**Levine:** This was mainly a response to the proposal that, the *Higher Education Exchange (HEE)* should be devoted to making college-level pedagogy more democratic. We academics are strategically placed members of powerful institutions. Therefore, we're missing the main action if we teach our students to be good democratic citizens, but ignore the massive impact of our own institutions on local (and international) economies. Just one example of the type of issue that *HEE* should examine is the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, which allowed universities to sell or

license patents to technologies that were developed in their laboratories using federal funds. This has become a multibillion-dollar source of revenue that has enriched and expanded higher education, but it has also shifted our universities' priorities. Why develop a solution to a local agricultural problem in partnership with neighboring farmers if a college lab can bring in thousands of times more money by developing a product for a global market?

**Brown:** That's a very useful example. Are there others? If academics are strategically placed members of powerful institutions, should they be the prime movers to change the status quo?

**Levine:** There are many other questions to ask about universities' behavior as economic and political institutions. For example, whom should we admit as students? What professional activities should we encourage and reward through hiring and promotion decisions? To whom should research results belong — the researchers, the university, the funder, or the whole public?

I don't know if senior faculty should be the prime movers, but they have the advantages of job security, status, and insider knowledge about how their institutions work. Probably a partnership between senior faculty and outsiders would make the most difference. Outsiders include stakeholders such as members of the state legislature — but also the broad public.

**Brown:** Let me ask you the question you just posed. What professional activities do you think faculty should encourage and reward in their hiring and promotion decisions that do not currently get enough attention?

**Levine:** There is pretty widespread pressure for faculty to be rewarded for "service," meaning the application of standard research techniques to current public issues, and the dissemination of accessible, topical findings. I'm not against this, although I think we have to be careful not to squeeze out other voices when we apply expert knowledge. Also, this kind of

research is rarely on the cutting-edge methodologically or theoretically, so doing a lot of it may lower academic standards. Finally, I believe that service is often already sufficiently rewarded, if not for junior faculty, at least for senior professors who get fame and



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recognition as a result.

Thus I would press for us to reward a different kind of engagement. I have in mind work that really is at the cutting edge of a discipline's progress, but that involves innovative, interesting, and mutually respectful collaborations with communities. Think, for example, of Elinor Ostrom's very creative work on the management of "common-pool resources." Her work draws from the traditions and special knowledge of existing communities; it influences the debate among highly sophisticated social theorists; and it is valuable for citizens who want to know how to build new institutions of their own. There is no tradeoff between academic rigor and civic engagement in Ostrom's work.

Incidentally, I have never been on a tenure track, and I'm grateful for that. Almost all of my work has been too eccentric — and too "applied" — to count toward tenure in a standard philosophy department. I'm in a foundation-supported institute that *must* stay involved with current public issues and make its work useful to people outside the academy. I'm not suggesting that we should abolish tenure and force all academics to support themselves with grant proposals. But my personal experience makes me think that the tenure process, as it is currently organized, discourages civic engagement — at least among professors at the beginnings of their careers.

**Brown:** Could you say more about the merits of deliberation itself as a form of civic engagement? You referred to public deliberation in your paper "The Internet and Civil Society" as something of a "black box." On the one hand, you have said that "deliberation is the most democratic way to improve citizens' views, since individuals are forced to defend their proposals in the face of those with different interests, backgrounds, and information. As a consequence, overtly selfish or foolish ideas tend to drop out." On the other hand, you have said that you are uncertain about deliberation's purposes, limits, value, and structure. Could you say more about that?

**Levine:** There are interesting debates about some issues on which I have not made up my own mind. For example, how much and what kind of equality is needed to make deliberation legitimate? I think it's patronizing and empirically false to assert that poor or poorly educated people can't function in a deliberative setting. On the other hand, massive inequality can certainly distort a deliberative exercise.

Another question: Do we always want official deliberative

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bodies (such as Congress) to make decisions on the basis of publicly articulated principles and reasons? Or is it sometimes actually desirable to use nondeliberative methods, such as logrolling, vote swapping, and side payments?

A third question: Should we always seek common ground with our opponents and treat them with respect, or is it sometimes appropriate to try to drive a wedge between our friends and enemies? (Here I think of the civil rights movement, which chose obdurate segregationists as targets for civil disobedience, because the “moderate” ones could muddy the rhetorical waters by deliberating.)

Finally, when is deliberation safe? When Slobodan Milosevic started persuading Serbs that they were fundamentally different from the Muslims in their midst (whom he called “Turks”); that they were oppressed; that they ought to seek revenge for a medieval military defeat; and that violent means were noble, he was giving his fellow citizens reasons to change their views about their identity, goals, and means. If this was “deliberation,” then what’s so great about it? And if it wasn’t deliberation, why wasn’t it? Cases like this are extremely common, and they make one wonder whether sheer self-interested negotiation isn’t generally safer than “deliberation.”

**Brown:** Let’s pursue your point about nondeliberative methods, self-interested negotiation including “logrolling” and “side payments,” what some think of as politics as usual. What policy contexts do you think are better served, better resolved by such means?

*“...sometimes it is better to deal than to deliberate.”*

**Levine:** Representatives of disadvantaged groups can often get more for their own members if they negotiate and split the difference with their opponents, rather than criticize the moral underpinning of a policy that they don’t like. Moral criticism is the essence of deliberation, but sometimes it is better to deal than to deliberate. Gutmann and Thompson in *Democracy and Disagreement* cite the example of unions that opposed NAFTA so strongly on the merits that they could not trade support for the treaty in return for anything else. Yet, arguably, union members would have been better off if they had received a large “side payment” (such as federal job-retraining money) in return for NAFTA. The way things turned out, they lost the debate, they lost the vote, and they got no compensation.

**Brown:** Coming back to your look at “The Internet and Civil

Society” you noted that there is “exit” instead of “voice” on the Web — “since leaving any Internet-based group is easy but changing its prevailing norms is difficult. The likely result is a decrease in public deliberation — especially about ends and values.” Does the Internet qualify as a place for deliberation?

**Levine:** There is obviously a massive amount of deliberation on the Internet. But uses of this medium vary enormously, from e-mail exchanges among old friends (which may be much like traditional letters), to on-line newspapers, to chat rooms, to carefully constructed deliberative environments such as “Unchat” (see [www.bodieselectric.com](http://www.bodieselectric.com)). In my view, there are two especially interesting and unresolved questions about the relationship between the Internet and deliberation: One is that search engines and other technological tools give us an unprecedented power to find specific ideas and information tailored to our own interests. These tools are great resources for deliberators, who can check their facts before they speak and efficiently seek alternative perspectives. At the same time, it is increasingly easy to avoid the discomfort and cognitive dissonance that may arise when one encounters unwelcome views and facts. Thanks to search engines, if I need political information, I no longer have to buy a newspaper (with its diverse array of perspectives and often dismaying news about other people’s lives); instead, I can search the Web for just the facts I *want*. Andrew Shapiro, Andrew Chin, Cass Sunstein, and others believe that deliberation is suffering as a result of the new efficiency of searching. Many other observers believe that this empirical conclusion is wrong. I would note that search engines can be used either to broaden one’s mind or to screen out uncomfortable ideas. Thus, what matters is not so much the technology, but the commitment of today’s Americans to seek out alternative views and diverse discussions. The general decline of interest in public affairs — and the shrinking membership in community associations — leads me to worry about how the Internet will be used.

Secondly, much on-line communication is with people whom we also know well, off-line. But the Internet adds a new option that was previously too expensive to be popular: anonymous (or pseudonymous) communication with strangers. Anonymity can encourage candor, especially about things like social stigmas; and that is good for deliberation. But anonymity may also discourage serious, ongoing discussion of shared issues — especially discussion that is linked to collective action.

**Brown:** Thank you, Peter.