Civic Provocations

EDITOR: Donald W. Harward
SERIES EDITOR: Barry Checkoway

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Why Now?
Because This Is a
Copernican Moment

David Scobey

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself,
what am I? And if not now, when?*—RABBI HILLEL

RABBI HILLEL'S FAMOUS PASSAGE, a touchstone of the Jewish ethical tradition, evokes the creative tension at the heart of undergraduate education. We become human, it implies, in the dialogue between self-care and responsibility to the larger world—or, to put it in the educational idiom of Bringing Theory to Practice, between the inner development and the civic development of the student. Yet that creative tension is not offered simply as an abstract model, an ideal type, a mission statement. As Hillel's final question underscores, it is urgently historical. It is a call for intervention in the present moment. It is upon us *now*.

It is that *now* that I want to write about. I am a historian by training, and I want to write about the historical moment within which the provocateurs in this volume—and many other colleagues—are pursuing our answers to Hillel's first two questions. We are part of a movement to connect academic work and public work, scholarship and citizenship, and the inner and civic development of students (and teachers). Over the past twenty years, that movement has seen robust success in the growth of practices and projects and in the proliferation of centers, faculty networks, and consortia like Bringing Theory to Practice. And over those same years, we have witnessed a growing crisis of civic culture in the United States—the thinning out, fragmenting, and privatizing of democratic public life.

Yet my concern here is not with the achievements of the academic engagement movement or the larger "civic recession" to which it has responded. Rather, I want to focus on a third aspect of our *now*: the current context in higher education within and against which we are working. If we compare the current situation to that of a quarter-century ago (when Campus Compact was launched) or a decade ago (when Bringing Theory to Practice began), it is clear that our efforts for change confront an academy in the throes of change, even revolution. Academic civic engagement emerged and flourished in response to change, and, in many ways, we have responded creatively to it. Yet I want to argue that the larger mix of crisis, change, and creative innovation that defines this *now* involves issues, challenges, and possibilities that our "civic turn" has not yet fully grappled with.

We all know or sense that the academy is in the throes of transformation. The knowledge, skills, and values in which students should be educated; the intellectual landscape of disciplines and degrees; the ways in which educational

institutions are organized; the funding of teaching, learning, and research—all this promises to be profoundly different in twenty years. The forces of change have resulted partly from our own inertia, partly from the consequences of our success, and partly from broad political, market, and technological developments not of our making. The question is not *whether* the academy will be changed, but *how*. Neither defending the status quo nor pursuing small-bore reforms is an option.

This is unnerving, even, or especially, for critics of the academic status quo. It has been tempting to assume the stability of an older, established paradigm against which, like a whetstone, our ideas for change have been honed: an undergraduate regime of full-time, postsecondary students and full-time, tenure-stream faculty; a four-year, two-stage course of study in which general education segues into advanced majors defined by disciplinary specializations; a curriculum segmented into fungible units of labor, effort, and time called "courses," "credit hours," and "semesters"; a campus world segregated into academics and extracurricular student life and hived off from the "real world." This *was* the paradigmatic architecture of baccalaureate education in the United States. Even as we have struggled with its negative effects—student instrumentalism, faculty hyperprofessionalism, institutional siloes, the disengagement of academics from public life—it made sense to critique higher education as *stuck*. Our goal was to act as an Archimedean lever, dislodging the academy from its satisfied, secure inertia.

Yet I want to argue that this is *not* the moment in which higher education finds itself. In almost every way, the taken-for-granteds of the older paradigm do not hold. Only about one-third of undergraduates fit the profile of recent high school graduates attending a single four-year institution; twice as many faculty work on term contracts as in tenure-stream positions. Student debt has doubled in five years, and its growth is now a core, corrosive element of the business plan of higher education. We have become caught in a tuition-growth bubble that seems to me unsustainable. In part as a result, the for-profit sector is burgeoning, as is online learning across *all* sectors—to my mind, an even more consequential change. All this is taking place in the context of a fiscal crisis, the result of a perfect storm of stressors: an expanding educational mission, declining public support, growing costs in areas like health care, information technology, and facilities maintenance. And beneath the fiscal crisis lies a legitimation crisis that has eroded the social compact between the academy and the larger society. None of this was true, or so massively and visibly true, when I developed the Arts of Citizenship Program at the University of Michigan fifteen years ago.

At the same time, as Bringing Theory to Practice has underscored, the educational practices that seem to make the most difference to student engagement— so-called "high-impact practices" such as interdisciplinary learning communities, study abroad, capstone research, and community-based learning—are precisely those that tend to *disrupt* the established ecology of atomized courses, disciplinary courses of study, and the separation of curricular from cocurricular experiences. The problem is not, then, that the "official" paradigm of undergraduate education is constricting yet effective; it is that the paradigm is constricting and exhausted. A mix of crisis, change, and counter-normative creativity makes a new paradigm imminent, and yet also inchoate and up for grabs.

I have used the metaphor of a Copernican moment to describe this, because it seems to me much like the moment when the Polish astronomer distilled the heliocentric theory. Renaissance astronomers had long begun to catalogue the anomalies in the night sky; everyone could see the inadequacy of the old Ptolemaic system and was speculating about a new one, but they could not see it whole. It was in this moment—the exhaustion of the older system in the face of anomalous new phenomena, the intuition of a new system toward which the anomalies gestured—that Copernicus undertook his work. Similarly, in higher education, an older, "official" paradigm of undergraduate education has exhausted itself, just as an array of new educational practices has emerged—something like the anomalous points of light that the Renaissance astronomers observed in the night sky. These new practices illuminate the inadequacies of the older undergraduate system, and they point the way toward "a more reasonable arrangement of circles," as Copernicus put it.

It is easy to locate in this metaphor the academic civic engagement movement. Our movement was, par excellence, a strategic and ethical response to the legitimation crisis: an effort to redraw the academic social compact by committing the work of teaching and learning to the enrichment of community and public life, and by trusting that such a commitment would, in turn, enrich teaching and learning and academic life. New experiments in publicly engaged teaching, learning, research, and cocurricular experience were among the brightest Copernican anomalies in the night sky.

And yet I want to question the *fullness* of our response to the educational crisis of the current moment. Even at its best, I would argue, the civic turn has tended to take as normative, or at least as unexamined, the assumptions of the traditional paradigm of undergraduate education: that our students are full-time and full of time, committed for a compact number of years to an educational experience in which they traverse the general education–major journey as a unified trajectory; that they have the time, space, and money for intensive, unpaid community-based learning; that they are taught largely by regular, full-time faculty who can undertake the hard work of community-based teaching, sometimes with the aid of paid civic-engagement staff; that the melding of public work and academic work is anchored in an "in-here" campus world that reaches out to partner with a locally bounded "out-there" community world.

And so I think we need to ask some new questions in this next chapter of our commitment to renewing the civic purposes of higher education. What does democratically engaged learning look like, and how can we foster it for an academy in which the majority of students will attend more than one institution, carry significant debt, and have the challenge of their employment paramount in their educational choices? What does public work look like for students who need constantly and strategically to blend family responsibilities, work pressures, and study in schedules with little time for large, chunky projects—students whose social geography conforms less and less to the in-here/out-there map of our partnership models? How do we support faculty in the intellectual and relationship-building work that underlies engaged education, even as the majority of them may be neither tenure-stream nor one-course adjuncts, but full-time contract employees? What does public engagement look like not simply at the scale of local, place-based communities, but at global and digital scales?

By way of prompting our collective thinking about these issues, let me end by suggesting preliminary answers. We need to update our assumptions about our students' lives. Unless we want engaged learning to be the preserve of students who are lucky to be full-payers, large financial-aid recipients, or attendees of selective institutions, we need to link it to student wage-earning and professional preparation. We need to integrate the pathways of career, liberal learning, and civic education—to see all of them as woven into a single, integral process of student development and self-authoring. Organizationally, we need to integrate career planning and mentoring with faculty-student engagement and community-based learning—and, at the same time, to educate students and external stakeholders *not* to cling to instrumental, linear paths between study, degree-holding, and jobs. We need to overcome any lingering allergy to engaging issues of the economic and professional benefits as threads in the braid of engaged and democratic education.

We need to develop educational practices and civic projects that engage not only local, but also trans-local, global, and digital scales of community—that is, all the scales of community that are now the ordinary lives of our students. This does not mean abandoning the practices and responsibilities of local community collaboration. Indeed—in the more expensive, unequal, socially fragmented institutional landscape that we face—working-class, first-generation, and nonwhite students are bound to be *more* localistic in their educational choices, even as they are parts of global networks and diasporas. But we need to develop educational practices that draw on their everyday weaving of geographically bounded, geographically networked, and online identities. Within a decade, the majority of academic credits in the United States are likely to be earned either wholly online on in hybrid "site/line" formats. Students who are already digital natives will learn to be online learners of one kind or another (whether instrumental or engaged learners remains to be seen) quite as naturally as they have had to learn fractions and essay writing today. We will want to teach them to be at once local, global, and digital learners and citizens—and this means learning it ourselves.

Finally, we will need more than ever to overcome the structural inequality and sectoral fragmentation that are among the most corrosive effects of the Copernican moment. In a world where the tuition bubble will have popped, we will need interinstitutional collaboration more than ever. In a world where most students are transfer students, we will need to make intersectoral collaboration, regional consortia, multi-institution pathways and partnerships (and therefore multiclass and multiracial student communities of practice) an *unexceptional* part of the landscape of engaged education. The stand-alone campus and the stand-alone service-learning experience—like the stand-alone personal computer—will be present in such a world. But like the personal computer, they will lose much of their value unless they become connected to larger networks of change.

One way or another, we are on the cusp of radical change. The Copernican moment may lead us down nightmarish pathways of instrumental education, in which off-the-shelf, modular degrees are purveyed to students in order to distribute them into some future, frozen, global division of labor. But the same forces of change open up other pathways that are difficult, bracing, and cool. Let us then carry into this future the values and creativity and democratic commitment that have marked the work of the academic civic engagement movement (and Bringing Theory to Practice). And if not now, when?