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The Meaning of a Compact

Anna Wasescha

Preface

To mark the 30th anniversary of Campus Compact, leaders from across the network came together in the summer of 2015 to reaffirm a shared commitment to the public purposes of higher education. Campus Compact's 30th Anniversary Action Statement of Presidents and Chancellors is the product of that collective endeavor. In signing the Action Statement, institutional leaders commit to deepening engagement work that maximizes impact for students and communities by building effective partnerships, preparing students for lives of citizenship, embracing place-based responsibilities, and challenging inequality. They also make a specific commitment to developing a campus civic action plan that makes public how they will implement the principles articulated in the document. As chair of the board of Connecticut Campus Compact, Anna Wasescha was an active participant in shaping the Action Statement; in this President's Essay, she shares her vision for why a compact still matters from the perspective of a community college president.

Introduction

Campus Compact's 30th anniversary presents an opportunity to reflect on what it means for American higher education to have a public purpose, to take stock of the path that led us to where we are today, and to make choices about how to strengthen our democracy by prioritizing civic engagement at our colleges and universities. As a community college president, I consider the focus on producing able and enlightened citizens important for many reasons.

I believe my students will shape the future of this country. They are diverse in every way, and many of them are energetic, intelligent, and creative. But their lives are challenging because, for the most part, they and their families are not really secure, at least not financially. When companies close or relocate, these individuals lose their jobs. When technology replaces workers and corporations downsize, students, their families, and their friends and neighbors have to prepare for other lines of work. Many community college students fit the definition that United Way organizations around the country are now using to put a face on this

phenomenon: ALICE. ALICE stands for "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed." These are the working poor.

College has traditionally been a path to the middle class, but the recent long recession coupled with wage stagnation has dimmed the prospects for too many of our graduates. Increasing reliance on loans to finance college has created a 1.3 trillion dollar debt load that lies heavily on the shoulders of students seeking a living wage and a better life for themselves and their families. This situation causes people to lose confidence in institutions they need to trust in order to believe in their country and themselves. A 2015 Gallup poll showed American confidence below the historical average for all but two institutions included in their confidence ratings since 1973. These two exceptions were the military and small businesses. According to Gallup,

> Americans' confidence in most major institutions has been down for many years as the nation has dealt with prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a major recession and sluggish economic improvement, and partisan gridlock in Washington. In fact, 2004 was the last year most institutions were at or above their historical average levels of confidence. Perhaps not coincidentally, 2004 was also the last year Americans' satisfaction with the way things are going in the United States averaged better than 40%. Currently, 28% of Americans are satisfied with the state of the nation. *(Jones, 2015, para. 3)*

As confidence in the state of our nation goes, so goes confidence in the public purpose of American higher education. Community college students across the nation, along with students at every other level in the academy, need to believe that college will make a positive difference in their lives, that what they learn in college will prepare them for satisfying careers and an active role in their communities. Employers need to share that belief, as do legislators and thought leaders. The will to believe in this version of the American dream is still strong, but in a democracy, there are many competing wills. The hard work—the work that is never completed—is building unity out of diversity. It is more imperative than ever that leaders of colleges and universities focus on the public purpose of American higher education.

To understand the path that brought us to this critical juncture, it helps me to reflect on my own experiences. In 2009, while I was the provost at a small rural community college in Minnesota, I was

selected to go on a 2-week study tour of colleges and universities in India organized by the U.S.–India Educational Foundation. The community college model was intriguing to the Indian educators we met because it had been successful in providing access to an affordable college education for millions of Americans. In a matter of 50 years or so, it had scaled up across nearly every state and was enrolling thousands upon thousands of citizens who could benefit from higher education in both the liberal arts and occupational training programs. The growing Indian economy has an almost insatiable need for educated workers that the existing system of higher education cannot supply in the numbers required. A system of open access, high quality, low tuition community colleges holds promise for India's burgeoning population.

India is everything I had read about and seen in books and movies. It is ineluctably visual and sensual, full of people, sounds, smells, and colors—a sharp contrast to the snow-covered prairies and far-apart small towns of northwestern Minnesota that were what I had last seen before boarding the plane to Delhi. But the focus of the trip was new to me, and what stood out on the campuses we visited was how prominent political statements were. Posters were everywhere. With a sign that read, "Say NO to Caste-based Reservations," the Youth for Equality group inveighed against the quota system that holds nearly 50% of university seats for protected classes of people. Under a silhouette of Lenin, the left-wing All India Students Association wrote,

> You have given me brotherhood towards the man I do not know. You have given me the added strength of all those living… you showed me how one person's pain could die in the victory of all… you have made me indestructible for I no longer end in myself.

There were posters warning men not to harass women sexually and others emphatic about women's rights in general. One said,

> It is we sinful women who came out raising the banner of truth up against barricades of lies. It is we sinful women now, even if the night gives chase, these eyes shall not be put out. For the wall which has been razed no one can raise it again.

An inscription carved into stone on the front of Arafat Hall at Jamia Millia Islamia says that the university

> feels deep affinity with you [Arafat] because we were also born in struggle during the great national movement launched by Gandhiji in this country against British rule…. The memory of that stirring period in our history still lingers in our mind, and feels close to liberation struggles in all lands.

I came away from India wondering why there were few outward signs of a lingering consciousness about the relationship between our own struggle for democracy and the shape of the system of American higher education that many of us enjoy. Like my contemporaries, I developed my political consciousness during the Vietnam War. My male friends, relatives, and neighbors were subject to the draft. The temporarily lucky ones had deferments to attend college, but ultimately they would also be called up to serve in an unpopular, unwinnable war in a country no one really understood or could locate easily on a map. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were political posters everywhere on college campuses. As the frequency and intensity of demonstrations escalated, culminating in 1970 with the shootings of unarmed student protesters, we had become, as Chuck Colson characterized it, "a nation at war with itself" *(Becker, 2007, p. 89).*

Much of what the antiwar protesters had learned about organizing came from the civil rights movement. They were following in the footsteps of visionary and courageous citizens who were willing to put their lives on the line for real democracy, and they in turn were followed by the organizers and citizens who coalesced around women's rights, LGBT rights, and, more recently, the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements. Somewhere along this arc of American history, the connection between higher education and democracy began to fade from public consciousness.

When I got back to Minnesota, I couldn't help notice the lack of activism at my college. The running conversations there were animated when it came to workforce training programs; cautious about the value of the liberal arts; and barely audible on topics such as political action, student power, community organizing, or the value of courageous conversations about race, gender, poverty, or inequality. This seems anathema to me because community colleges are themselves movements, and generally movements have radical political roots that are still reflected in their organizations

decades after their founding. My ruminations led me to the 1947 report of President Truman's Commission on Higher Education titled *Higher Education for American Democracy*, published, coincidentally, the same year that India gained its independence.

President Truman had many good reasons for appointing the commission. He wanted to press the existing system of higher education into service to the nation by defining its public purpose and then finance its expansion so that it could enroll the millions of Americans who either had been in World War II or had worked to support the war effort. Without a mechanism for educating these individuals and reorienting them to civilian life, he anticipated significant social upheaval and unacceptable levels of unemployment. He named George Zook, the president of the American Council on Education, as chair and appointed educators and others respected for their leadership to positions on the commission. The commission struggled with disagreements about, for example, the propriety of distributing federal aid to private colleges, but they were in accord about the strategic role higher education could play in strengthening democracy. Within a year, they issued a six-volume report that laid the foundation for the system of higher education we have today.

Renewing the Compact

In 1985, nearly 40 years later, when the presidents of Brown University, Stanford University, and Georgetown University and the president of the Education Commission of the States founded Campus Compact, they were responding to the fundamental charge of the Truman Commission:

> "To preserve our democracy we must improve it." Surely this fact determines one of today's urgent objectives for higher education. In the past our colleges have perhaps taken it for granted that education for democratic living could be left to courses in history and political science. It should become instead a primary aim of all classroom teaching and, more important still, of every phase of campus life. *(President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, Vol.1, p. 9)*

These presidents knew from direct experience that college students regularly engaged in community service and civic life, but they also understood that this was not the prevailing view of the American public. They rejected the idea that in America, the model

of success was best exemplified by someone like Gordon Gekko ("Greed is good") in the film *Wall Street*, and they set about raising the profile of thousands of college students genuinely, altruistically working to improve the quality of life in their communities. In 1999, addressing similar challenges in a different time, presidents in the Campus Compact drafted the *Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education (2000)*; in that statement, they wrote:

> Higher education is uniquely positioned to help Americans understand the histories and contours of our present challenges as a diverse democracy. It is also uniquely positioned to help both students and our communities to explore new ways of fulfilling the promise of justice and dignity for all, both in our own democracy and as part of the global community. We know that pluralism is a source of strength and vitality that will enrich our students' education and help them learn both to respect difference and to work together for the common good. *(para. 5)*

Now, in 2016, we presidents in Campus Compact are signing on to the *Campus Compact 30th Anniversary Action Statement of Presidents and Chancellors (2016)* to renew our commitment to the public purpose of higher education in our democracy. Despite all the progress that has been made institutionalizing civic engagement at colleges and universities across the country, the decline in civic participation nationally and the increase in inequality requires a deeper and broader commitment. We pledge to work together to

> build a world in which all students are prepared for lives of engaged citizenship, all campuses are engaged in strong partnerships advancing community goals, and all of higher education is recognized as an essential building block of a just, equitable, and sustainable future. *(Campus Compact, 2016, p. 2)*

These successive iterations of a renewed commitment to the public purpose of higher education championed by Campus Compact are not whispers. But they are competing with the loud voices playing through the speakers of popular American culture. Spliced into the timeline from the 1947 Truman Commission report to the 2016 Campus Compact Action Statement are hundreds of countervailing cultural, social, and political phenomena

that have contributed to diminished public confidence in the role of higher education in our democracy. Four of these stand out for me: the labels we apply to generations of young people—because language is a powerful shaper of perception; the impact of ending the draft; the slogan "It's the economy, stupid"; and the dominance of cable television. On the surface, these may seem like a random group of phenomena, but each one of them is a window into how the public perceives the purpose of American higher education.

Names as Doors of Perception

First, consider the names we have given to generations of young adults since the end of World War II: Boomers, Hippies, Yuppies, Generation X, Generation Y, Millennials. We settle on these handles and then apply them as a way to simplify our understanding of cohorts of people, especially when they are of traditional college age. The way we understand these groups sets up expectations for what kind of nation they will create when it is their turn to lead. These generational tags are reinforced in all forms of media and then take on life as target markets. The more mass media we consume, the harder it becomes to shake off the biases that these terms reinforce about groups of people who are approximately the same age but may have extraordinarily different life experiences and value systems.

The people the Truman Commission envisioned in college were 1940s Americans pictured in *Life* magazine. The commission was not blind to race, poverty, and rural isolation. In the context of their time, their proposals to end segregated education; enroll women, adults, and part-time students; expand campuses; increase enrollment by the millions; and offer free tuition were radical departures from the status quo. However, it is unlikely that members of the commission would have imagined that the institutions making up the system they were advocating for would become hotbeds of civil unrest, sites of antiwar demonstrations, or places where Old Main would be occupied by protesters and ROTC buildings burned to the ground. Despite all the equal rights and civil rights work that remained to be accomplished, the American people after World War II were united in victory, confident in their government, and secure enough in the present to make significant investments in an even better future for the nation.

These 1940s Americans were the group the journalist Tom Brokaw *(1998)* wrote about in *The Greatest Generation*: World War II veterans, their families, their communities. Robert Putnam

(2000), in *Bowling Alone*, explained why they deserved to be called great and why they were so engaged in hard work, citizenship, and volunteerism. This stereotype of the "greatest generation" means different things to different people but, on balance, it suggests that this cohort of Americans added significant value to our society. The terms applied to generations who followed were not as generous. From the boomers of the 1950s to hippies of the 1960s to the current generation of millennials, these people have been portrayed as not caring about success as defined by the "establishment," concerned only about their own ambitions, deluded into believing they were all above average, as having given up on social institutions and norms of behavior and dress or having tethered themselves to a computer. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the lack of confidence in government, in college students, and in higher education institutions, although not universal and not completely justifiable on the basis of data, permeates the culture of our country. We ourselves have a confidence gap, and we need to close it.

The Draft Closes and College Opens

The Selective Service transitioned to a lottery system in December 1969. Based on date of birth, the lottery distributed the possibility of military service randomly across the population, easing the class divide between those who could afford college and those who could not. Student deferments ended in 1971, and the draft itself ended in 1973. Across this time period, the popular image of college students began to shift. The draft was over, but campus unrest was not. Nearly a decade of antiwar activism on college campuses had created a strong social mechanism for opposition politics that survived. Students channeled their energy into multiple other social justice campaigns around, for example, reproductive rights, equal opportunity, inclusiveness, and LGBT rights. Whereas the Truman Commission had earlier called for area studies as a means of learning about the rest of the world, students in the 1970s demanded that ethnic studies and women's studies be added to the curriculum as one way to empower marginalized groups. When the draft was in place and the war was escalating, there had been one riveting focus. When that tide turned, students had the skills to mobilize around many different causes.

At the same time student power was diffusing, the expansion of higher education, especially at the community college level, created other changes. College was no longer a refuge for men seeking to avoid the Vietnam War. Nor was it any longer an exclusive club for the rich and well-born. Community colleges were designed to

enroll commuters, part-time students, adults, parents. Financial aid at those colleges made enrollment possible for students without the means to pay the tuition out of their own pockets. In addition, because the baby boom generation was ending, enrollments of traditional-age students started naturally to decline, causing many colleges to transition from being highly selective institutions building their reputations by keeping students out to highly responsive institutions devising systems to draw students in.

If a person on the street had been asked, "Who are America's college students?" the answer in the decade after the draft ended would have been vastly different from that given the decade before. They were no longer mostly male, mostly privileged, mostly White. They had become anyone and everyone. The college deferment system was created because "modern nations, to survive in peace or war, must have an adequate number of scientific, professional and specialized personnel in both civilian and military pursuits" *(Frusciano, 1980, p. 22)*. These people were the elite, by definition. They were the best and the brightest, and the government could trust them with the safety and security of the entire United States. This is why most Americans accepted the practice of deferring military service for them. Once anyone and everyone could get in, college attendance ceased being a mark of distinction. And in that fade-out, colleges lost a reputation they had enjoyed in the first half of the 20th century, that they were the institutions that produced the people who were indispensable.

It's the Economy, Stupid

A third paradigm-shifting milestone was the arrival of the slogan "It's the economy, stupid" as a permanent part of the American lexicon. James Carville, Bill Clinton's campaign manager, coined it in 1992, and it quickly became a "that says it all" meme passed from one person to another as a shorthand explanation of how the system really works in this country. Candidate Clinton frequently reminded Americans that "a rising tide lifts all boats" to reinforce the message and aptly, he oversaw an economic turnaround. But presidents are thought leaders, and they can influence the national dialogue in ways that no one else can. The Truman Commission espoused the concept of democracy as more important than anything else: It was a matter of conviction tantamount to a secular religion that motivated innovation, was an engine of social mobility, and was the one thing that had the potential to unify a heterogeneous global society. Roosevelt and then Truman oversaw an extended period in our history when government funding not

only fueled the economy, but also healed a society nearly broken by the Great Depression. By the time President Clinton came to office, however, government had been widely accepted as the problem and capitalism—as reflected in Calvin Coolidge's rendering, "The business of America is business"—was the solution.

In India, the lingering memories of the struggle for democracy are still visible and still inform the national identity. People remember the oppression of living under British rule. In America, any awareness of our colonial experience is hard to detect in the signs and symbols of our popular culture. Our dreams, as we decode them from slogans and mass media depictions, are now more about the acquisition of wealth and power than about "we the people" working "to form a more perfect union." Legislators are representatives of the people and, for public institutions especially, they are the source of significant levels of funding. They have exerted pressure on colleges and universities to respond to what their constituents say they want, which for decades has been career preparation (even the kind one receives in a liberal arts college) and workforce training, all aimed at ensuring economic security.

For community college students, many of whom are economically insecure, this single-minded focus on preparation for work is a life preserver. It resolves a real and immediate need. But the quality of the life that it saves depends on the effective functioning of our democracy. The Truman Commission put it this way:

> Democracy is much more than a set of political processes. It formulates and implements a philosophy of human relations. It is a way of life—a way of thinking, feeling, and acting in regard to the associations of men and of groups, one with another.… The fundamental concept of democracy is a belief in the inherent worth of the individual, in the dignity and value of human life. Based on the assumption that every human being is endowed with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, democracy requires of its adherents a jealous regard, not only for their own rights, but equally for the similar rights of others. *(President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, Vol. 1, p. 11)*

Yes, there are a lot of loud voices in the room, but college presidents can ground the conversation by returning to first principles, to the

importance of educating students not only for work but also for active engagement as citizens.

Fair and Balanced on 2000+ Channels

The last on my list of four phenomena that have weakened public confidence in the public purpose of higher education is the effect of cable television on the critical reasoning skills of Americans. Sixty-five million Americans are now subscribers. The average American watches 28 hours of television per week. By age 65, this average American will have been watching television for the equivalent of 9 years full-time and will have seen two million commercials *(Sound Vision Staff Writer, n.d.).*

Viewers can watch whatever channels they wish. If they tune in only to those programs that reflect their values, what they see reinforces their beliefs, no matter how ungrounded in reality those might be. Unlike college, cable television does not force anyone to encounter views that are different from their own, nor does it develop in anyone the skills of analysis or the ability to examine evidence critically. There is no active and collaborative learning, no question-and-answer period between the program and the audience, no dialogue except what goes on within the four corners of the screen. And perhaps worst of all, there is no obligation to be right on facts, clear on sources, or honest in interpretation. Anything goes on cable television.

Early in the 1980s, an FCC chair who had been a campaign staffer for President Reagan, Mark S. Fowler, wrote a report arguing that the "fair and balanced" requirement for a broadcast license was atavistic because cable television had expanded so much that by definition people had access to opposing views. He also thought it was a violation of First Amendment free speech rights. Fowler's position was that "the perception of broadcasters as community trustees should be replaced by a view of broadcasters as marketplace participants" *(Holt, 2011, p. 55)*. By 1987, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), under a new chair, Dennis R. Patrick, ended the provision requiring "fair and balanced" reporting over the airwaves.

Television started out as an industry that was a twin good: It performed a public service and provided entertainment. These are American airwaves over which networks transmit their signals and originally, it seemed only fair that the public get something in exchange. Public television, for example, was part of the grand

bargain, as was the Emergency Broadcast System and the practice of dedicating airtime to the news and to children's programming.

Cable television in its present form is the most effective public education system in America. We may not endorse it as education, but it is instructing nonetheless. It captivates its viewers for more hours in an ordinary week than most college students spend in the classroom and on homework. And in its present form, it plays a role in eroding confidence in major institutions of our democracy. There is a reason Americans have so little confidence in the presidency, the Congress, and the Supreme Court, and it is not driven by deep conversations around seminar tables.

Changing the Key

In May of 1971, the University of Minnesota, my alma mater, ran a special report in their *Alumni News* titled "Are Americans Losing Faith in Their Colleges?" The article pointed to the fact that Congress and state legislatures, formerly favorable toward investment in higher education, had become increasingly less so. In response to this question, the writers concluded that

> the majority must also rethink and restate—clearly and forcefully—the purpose of our colleges and universities. It has become clear in recent years that too few Americans—both on and off the campus—understand the nature of colleges and universities, how they function, how they are governed, why they must be centers for criticism and controversy, and why they must always be free. *(Are Americans Losing Faith, 1971, p. 33)*

That was 24 years *after* the Truman Commission report "clearly and forcefully" made the case for the public purpose of higher education and the potential for it to reach millions more Americans, thereby ensuring that this nation would maintain its position as the "leader of the free world."

The presidents who founded Campus Compact in 1985 and the presidents who now sustain the organization in 2016 share democratic ideals about the public purpose of American higher education. We have experiences in our daily lives on campus that prove that American college students are engaged in their communities, have great potential for civic engagement, and are optimistic about the future. "Education is the making of the future," as the Truman Commission report *(President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, Vol. 1, p. 6)* asserted, and those of us leading colleges and universities

believe in the nobility of the work for exactly that reason. We can and do help to shape the narrative about colleges and their students by what we write and say about our institutions and the impact we have on the lives of those who enroll. But we can do better.

The United States may be one of the most enduring democracies in history, but India is far and away the largest democracy in the world. Leaders there see that education is the making of their future, too. Many of the individuals I met in 2009 had studied in America and had taken home with them a positive opinion about American higher education. India is building a strong capitalist economy, but the struggle for democracy is fresh enough in their minds that they are also passionate about sustaining it through their colleges and universities. That was evident at all the campuses I visited.

The lesson that I brought back with me from India is that it is unwise, even perilous, to let time dim the memory of higher education's purpose in a democracy. If we lose sight of this purpose, all that remains in the value proposition is an economic argument. Democracy tempers capitalism with its insistence on equality and inclusion and its focus on the common good. Back at my campus in rural Minnesota, we did not have a center for civic engagement or any kind of program that promoted service-learning in the community. We paid little attention to the relationship between our college and the health of our democracy. While I was in India, the Red River rose 40 feet over flood stage, and hundreds of students, faculty, and staff labored mightily around the clock to fill a portion of the three million sandbags that were needed. There were thanks all around after that event, but there was no overlay of narrative about how mobilizing a college community in an emergency was a powerful experience of democracy in action or how citizens can be inspired to set aside individual needs for the benefit of the community as a whole. That is what presidents can do. They can change the key. When they tell the stories about powerful, shared experiences that affect our college communities, they can place them within the framework of civic engagement in a democracy.

At a recent Campus Compact gathering in Boston, the compelling story that retired General Stanley McChrystal told was that most Americans now believe citizenship means just two things: paying taxes and voting. And only one in three eligible voters does the latter. McChrystal is working on Service Year, a project to engage young adults in a year of meaningful service. It is not the draft, but it has elements of it because its expansion will lead to more and more young Americans' dedicating a year of their lives

to the common good. This experience of giving back, of serving society, unifies fellow citizens. Together with the Peace Corps and VISTA, Teach for America, City Year, and "gap years" of all kinds, this movement has the potential to change our culture, to challenge our stereotypes about upcoming generations of college students.

There are other signs that the civic engagement movement is taking hold. More and more colleges across the country have staffed centers for civic or community engagement, included civic engagement in their strategic plans, and supported faculty professional development opportunities on how to include service-learning in academic courses. Results from the 2015 American Freshman Survey "point to the highest level of civic engagement in the study's 50-year history," according to a recent article in *Inside Higher Ed*.

> Nearly 40 percent of students said that becoming a community leader is a "very important" or "essential" life objective for them. About 60 percent of incoming freshmen rated improving their understanding of other countries and cultures as just as important. Both were all-time highs for the categories. *(New, 2016, para. 15)*

American colleges and universities are unique in the world. They combine preparation for a life of work with broad exposure to the liberal arts. They seek to prepare well-rounded, whole human beings with the capacity to love and to work, to be good family members, neighbors, friends, and citizens. Inside and outside the classroom, faculty and staff guide students in making meaning from their collective memories and reflections, histories, connections to other people around the world struggling for self-rule, and informed points of view about subjects and whole disciplines. College and university presidents themselves are in a unique position. We can frame the purpose of our institution around citizenship as the foundation for all else that follows. That is our enduring compact with our students, our institutions, and our nation.

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About the Author

Anna Wasescha is president of Middlesex Community College CT. Prior to her taking on this role in 2011, she was provost at Minnesota State Community and Technical College in Fergus Falls. In her career in higher education, she has worked in both student and academic affairs, in two and four-year institutions, in both public and private sectors. Community colleges are an expression of core values that have inspired Wasescha throughout her career: equality of opportunity, social justice, and education as liberation. Wasescha has an undergraduate degree in English Literature, a master's degree in higher education, and a doctoral degree in educational policy and administration, all from the University of Minnesota.