Paul Pribbenow, president, and Harry Boyte, senior scholar, of Augsburg College

Should higher education reject elitism and return to solving real community problems?

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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Present

Tom Abeles, John Adams, Harry Boyte, Dave Broden (vice chair), Paul Gilje (executive director), Sallie Kemper (associate director), Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Pribbenow, Dana Schroeder (associate director).

Summary

According to Harry Boyte, senior scholar at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, we must think of colleges and universities as more than a private good, more than a ticket to a job, but as a public resource. He believes that is the legacy of the land-grant tradition, in which there was a great sense of interactivity, partnership and collaborative work and university scholars were seen as grounded in the public problems of society. But he says that vision goes against the conventional wisdom of higher education today, where elitism has become common, along with detachment from community engagement.

Augsburg President Paul Pribbenow says colleges can play a critical role both in equipping students to go out into the world with a sense of agency, no matter what their profession is, and in finding ways to be part of the community. The fact that by 2020, 70 percent of the jobs in Minnesota will require some type of postsecondary certificate or degree presents a challenge that will require alignment across all postsecondary institutions in the state. The schools, he says, must do what they each do best, so they can be complementary to each other.

Boyte notes that our understanding of science has shifted over the years, which has affected the whole research culture in higher education today. That culture now prides itself on being detached from the real world. This is an erosion, he says, of the old understanding of land-grant research, which was about the human condition and engaging with problems in the state. He points out that only Massachusetts requires colleges to report on their work in civic engagement. Pribbenow laments the fact that Minnesota doesn't have a forum where higher education institutions and systems come together to talk about collaboration.

Biographies

Harry C. Boyte is senior scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg College in Minneapolis and a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He is also visiting professor at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in South Africa. He is founder of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey School, which has merged into the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College.

In 2012, he served as coordinator of the American Commonwealth Partnership, a network of higher education groups and institutions. The partnership was created at the invitation of the White House Office of Public Engagement and worked with the Department of Education to develop strategies to strengthen higher education as a public good, including the national deliberations Shaping Our Future and The Changing World of Work. From 1993 to 1995, Boyte was national coordinator of the New Citizenship, a cross-partisan alliance of education, civic, business and philanthropic civic groups. It worked with the White House Domestic Policy Council to analyze the gap between citizens and government and to propose solutions.

In the 1960s, as a young man he was a field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was headed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Subsequently, Boyte was a community and labor organizer in the South. He has a Ph.D. in social and political thought from Union Institute and University.

Paul Pribbenow is president of Augsburg College in Minneapolis, serving in that position since 2006. Previously, he served as president of Rockford College in Rockford, Ill. He also has served as research fellow for the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind.; dean for College Advancement and secretary of the Board of Trustees at Wabash College; vice president of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and associate dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago.

Pribbenow serves on the board of directors of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and the executive committee of the Minnesota Private College Council. He holds a B.A. degree (1978) from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, and M.A. (1979) and Ph.D. (1993) degrees in social ethics from the University of Chicago. In 2008, he received the Distinguished Service Award from Luther College.

Background

The Civic Caucus has released two recent statements on human capital: one in September 2014 laying out the human capital challenges facing the state today and in coming years and a follow-up paper in January 2015 offering recommendations for maintaining a high quality workforce in Minnesota. The Civic Caucus interviewed Harry Boyte and Paul Pribbenow to get their perspectives on the role and purpose of higher education during a time when the world of work is changing.

Discussion

The land-grant tradition imagined the University of Minnesota (U of M) as part of the state, not just partnering with the state. (Note: The mission of land-grant colleges or universities, created by the federal Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, is to focus on the teaching of practical agriculture, science, military science and engineering, without excluding classical studies, to farmers and workers, as well as professionals. This new mission was a response to the industrial revolution and changing social class. It differed from the historic focus of higher education on an abstract liberal arts curriculum, largely for elites. The University of Minnesota is a land-grant university. For further discussion of the land-grant tradition and its history, see the Civic Caucus interview with Robert Kennedy in January 2015.)

According to Harry Boyte, senior scholar at Augsburg College, early U of M leaders said that the University was not the property of those in the university, but the property of the people of the state. "There was a great sense of interactivity, partnership and collaborative work," Boyte said. "Great scholars at the University were seen as grounded in the public problems of society."

"How do we reinvigorate the older public purposes, the sense that colleges and universities should be part of the life of the society?" he asked. "In the land-grant case, that was also strongly connected to a democratic purpose. Voting was a piece of democracy, but democracy was a society we build everywhere. There are signs of the revival of this purpose and mission at the U of M and elsewhere to build on, but this goes against the conventional wisdom of higher education today."

We must think of colleges and universities as more than a private good, more than a ticket to a job, but as a public resource. "That means recognizing and taking on the detached research culture at the U of M and elsewhere and also taking on the elitism that has become common in higher education," Boyte said. "We have a very elitist system and it's all over schools' rankings in the *U.S. News & World Report* college list. The rankings privilege exclusivity in admissions (the more students rejected, the higher the rankings) and they also privilege detachment from community engagement."

Through an initiative of the American Commonwealth Partnership, organized in 2012 with partners including the Kettering Foundation, the National Issues Forums, and Campus Compact in honor of the 150 th anniversary of the Morrill Land-Grant Act, 15 or 20 conversations took place in Minnesota and 130 across the country that made clear the potential receptivity of the broad citizenry to the public purposes of higher education. The groups discussed what the purpose of higher education should be. "That question was often met with astonishment," Boyte said. Minnesota State Senator Dave Senjem told Boyte he'd never heard the question of purpose talked about at the Legislature.

These conversations, Boyte said, offered several options for the purpose of higher education: (1) preparing the country to compete in the global economy; (2) working with society on solving social problems; and (3) working on questions of access and equity.

Narrow policy elites often make bad decisions. "We need to bring the people into the conversation," Boyte said. The initiative, he said, found two important things: (1) The general public worries that the discussion of higher education is too narrow, that we're losing something vitally important as we only focus on narrow preparation for jobs, and that higher education used to be more connected to the problems of society and to working with communities; and (2) People believe that students should be prepared to be flexible, not just ready for today's jobs, but the jobs of 20 years from now. Boyte said people were eager to hear about the history of higher education's connection to its communities.

Again working with the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums and Minnesota Campus Compact, a design team was developed in Minnesota that prepared the January 2015 report "The Changing World of Work: What Should We Ask of Higher Education?" The team included representatives of six two-year and four-year higher education institutions in the Twin Cities: Augsburg College, Century College, Hamline University, Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) and St. Paul College. In preparing the report, the group gathered concerns from hundreds of citizens addressing questions such as how colleges and universities are preparing students for the job market and how they can work with communities to shape the changing world of work.

Boyte said several themes came out of those discussions:

- Many people are worried about the changing world of work: Jobs that are increasingly contract, temporary jobs without many benefits or security; unsteady employment; technological change, which could impact huge parts of the economy.

- People feel there has been a narrowing of the understanding of higher education. There was enthusiasm for the idea that higher education can contribute to communities in multiple ways, including not only preparing students to fit in, but also preparing students to be agents of change.

- People are worried about elitism. The land-grant tradition believed in excellence of scholarship, but also in democratic excellence. Democratic excellence is the principle that a mix of people from different backgrounds can achieve greatness in the context of high expectations in a way that a focus on a winnowing process for the stars and the success stories can't. There is a lot of public concern about "look-out-for-number-one" values in America, focused on exclusivity, "the best and the brightest." There is widespread worry that respect for everyday citizens' talents and intelligence has declined, along with respect for different kinds of work.

Higher education should be not only about training students for jobs, but also training them to be innovators and creators of different kinds of jobs. Boyte said the decision to move the Center for Democracy and Citizenship from the U of M's Humphrey School of Public Affairs to Augsburg College came about because he believes Augsburg "really embodies the old land-grant tradition, that

a mix of students of all different kinds in a challenging environment can achieve great things. We also thought the faculty would be innovative in taking on initiatives to meet the needs of communities in new ways. We've found Augsburg to be a great fit in thinking innovatively about future leaders who can be change agents."

Colleges should think about all of their assets as resources for the community: their buildings, their purchasing power and their convening power.

Colleges have tended to go the meritocratic, elitist route. Augsburg President Paul Pribbenow said during his 14 years as a college president, he always thought what Boyte had just described to be "what colleges are all about." He said the public has not held colleges accountable.

Colleges can play a critical role both in equipping students to go out into the world with a sense of agency, no matter what their profession is, and in finding ways to be in the community. "Augsburg has tried to find ways to be in the community," Pribbenow said, "to be there alongside of our neighbors. We're in the most diverse zip code between Chicago and Los Angeles. It's a powerful classroom for our students to learn in and for us to illustrate what a democracy college can be. That's led us to innovation in ways we're equipping students for particular professions and careers. It's also led us to a real passion for the notion that it's about more than the job they have. It's about the kind of life they lead and the leadership they provide in their neighborhoods, their communities and the organizations they'll be a part of. That's at the heart of being the kind of college we want to be."

Boyte pointed out that Augsburg is the most diverse private college in the Midwest. Pribbenow added that Augsburg is the second most diverse of all higher education institutions in Minnesota, behind only Metropolitan State University.

Augsburg is a pilot site for employer advisory councils for its career center, its faculty and its professional programs. Pribbenow said the college brings business to the table to learn about what future trends are going to be and what Augsburg can do in curriculum, in internship opportunities and in experiential education that will respond to those trends. "We're already a place that has a deep commitment to experiential education," he said. Augsburg uses a lot of adjunct professors of practice, who come out of industry and bring that experience into the classroom.

Augsburg is in constant conversation with the corporate community about their needs, Pribbenow said. He pointed to Augsburg's development of a joint nursing program with MCTC as a direct response to the college's participation in a dialogue about Minnesota's health-care needs.

Pribbenow said Augsburg asked Wells Fargo for a gift to support a new capital project at the college. The bank was intrigued that the college is such a diverse institution and that it's preparing the type of students who are going to be needed by places like Wells Fargo in the next decades. He said that led the bank to change its funding guidelines to honor institutions that are preparing the kinds of students they're going to need in their workforce. "That led me to understand that you can capture the imagination of business by the kind of institution you're becoming," Pribbenow said.

By 2020, 70 percent of the jobs in Minnesota will require some type of postsecondary certificate or degree. "That's a challenge," Pribbenow said. "That's going to require alignment across

all the systems: MnSCU, the University and the private colleges." He feels the higher education systems were in better alignment in Illinois, where he previously served as a college president, than they are in Minnesota.

"We're all created to do what we do best," he said. "If we do what we do best and it's complementary to each other, then the overall system works." Through the MnSCU system, he said, there is a real need for the two-year colleges to meet the needs of businesses in different parts of state.

"What St. Paul College and MCTC are doing is a direct response to the needs of the neighborhoods, especially along the Green [light-rail] Line," Pribbenow said. "That's being done in limited ways without a conversation across the system about how to align things and not be redundant with each other." He noted the Augsburg is directly across the street from the U of M, yet they don't share residence halls or arts facilities. "We've created redundancies across the state that don't really respond to efficient use of resources," he said.

Every institution of any kind in Minnesota has had a richer, deeper sense of democratic mission and purpose that has eroded and needs to be recovered. "The same is true of higher education," Boyte said. One of the interesting things, he said, is the shift in our understanding of science documented in *Science, Democracy, and the American University,* a new book by Harvard historian Andrew Jewett. Before World War II, most scientists didn't think of themselves as value-neutral. "They saw themselves as democrats bringing practices and values like cooperation, belief in inquiry, free discussion and testing ideas in practice," Boyte said. That understanding of science shifted dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s, he said, to a belief that science should have nothing to do with humanity and should be value-free and detached.

"That affected the whole research enterprise in higher education in a bad way," he said. "Now there are cultures of research that pride themselves on being uncontaminated by the world, so they're observing the world, not participating in the world. That is a great erosion of the old understanding of land-grant research, which was about the human condition and engaging with problems in the state. But there are important examples of science reconnecting with its democratic roots, like colleagues at the Institute for Child Development at the U of M who are working on what is called 'Executive Function,' skills of self-control among children."

Boyte said we must build on such examples, reconnecting with the sense of purpose to the research, teaching and scholarship we need. "I don't think this is detached from the interests of business," he said. He will soon address the annual Gates Foundation conference on higher education on the questions, "What would it mean to recover the older, democratic purposes of higher education and to bring them back? What kinds of leaders are the students going to be? How are they going to impact the nature of jobs in the businesses they create?"

Augsburg is involved in a project called Anchor Institutions, a collaborative of nine colleges and universities and seven health-care institutions along the Green Line. "We're trying to find ways," Pribbenow said, "to model how together we can solve neighborhood problems, create more workforce development, help to build more businesses in those neighborhoods. It's hard work, because every time you come up with a great idea, somebody will put up an obstacle. That's the challenge. There's certainly no magic bullet. It's no wonder the public is skeptical of our institutions if we don't provide any evidence that we're thinking about how to save money."

Collaborative practices can be seen as civic skills. Boyte said new understandings of child brain research by our U of M colleagues and others show that kids can develop skills for self-direction, for controlling their reactions, for paying attention, for focusing on goals, for becoming intellectually nimble. These are predictive of their life success. "These are civic and democratic skills," he said. Kids should learn the skills of self-control. They also overlap with skills of civic agency, capacities to work across differences with different kinds of people.

It's important to make sure faculty members understand what's expected of them in advancing the college's mission. Pribbenow said at Augsburg, "from day one, we're trying to make sure the faculty understands that. At a private institution, especially of our scale, it is possible to bring about alignment between mission and the kinds of expectations we have for faculty."

The individualist-achievement, hypercompetitive norms that dominate in higher education immediately disadvantage kids from working-class, minority or first-generation backgrounds. Studies from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University show that "they hear such norms as an attack on their values, which are much more interdependent, collaborative values," Boyte said.

Teacher education today across America includes virtually nothing on the new brain research on infants and children. "There is an important opportunity to increase knowledge in teacher education about how kids learn to be self-directed and in control of their lives, and also how kids learn to work with others who are different," Boyte said. We need to integrate bodies of knowledge in more holistic ways, he said.

The big constraint to collaboration and change is the rankings of colleges in places like *U.S. News & World Report.* In 2003, according to Boyte, the new president of Syracuse University tried to bring the democracy idea to the University. She wanted to change the admission standards so that students who graduated from high school in Syracuse would be able to go to the University for free.

A group of disgruntled faculty members thought these changes meant that Syracuse was losing its chance to be like Harvard and Yale, Boyte said. By 2011, Syracuse had moved from 40th to 62nd in the *U.S. News* rankings. The Board of Regents decided to investigate the slide in rankings, so the president left. The new president no longer makes any mention of community engagement, Boyte said.

Massachusetts, and specifically Boston, has a lot of collaboration among higher education institutions. Pribbenow said that there are leading examples of consortia there, along with many ways of doing things together. He pointed out that undergraduates at the five colleges in the Associated Colleges of the Twin Cities (ACTC)-Augsburg, Hamline University, St. Catherine University, University of St. Thomas and Macalester College-can take courses at any of the other colleges. The group also does joint purchasing, which saves millions of dollars a year. "We have pieces of it," he said, "but we haven't found a way to talk about it that has the power you find in a place like Massachusetts."

Boyte added that the Massachusetts Higher Education Council is the only state agency in the country that makes schools accountable to report on their work on civic engagement.

Minnesota doesn't have a forum where the various higher education institutions and systems come together, Pribbenow commented. He believes such a forum could help in collaboration, if it had the right kind of authority, mission and leadership.

When the U of M did away with its General College a decade ago, a lot of the students started coming to Augsburg and St. Catherine because they were equipped to make college accessible and affordable for them. Augsburg became one of the first places in the state to admit undocumented students, Pribbenow said. Forty percent of the school's incoming students each fall now are students of color. "We've become the place that is responding to demographic shifts," he said. "It's actually changed the nature of our day-to-day life on campus. This is a deep commitment."

Pribbenow said Augsburg has 50 full-time-equivalent staff members working in areas related to student success: remedial needs, emotional challenges, learning disabilities, and recovery from addiction. "If we admit them, we have to believe we can help them be successful," he said. "That means making the investment to provide that help."

Boyte called that a shift in framework from thinking, "How do we make students college-ready?" to "How do we make colleges student-ready?" "We see the most innovative schools in the country asking that question," he said.