Does this sound even vaguely like what is now understood to be the purpose of higher education? Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge.

In fact, this mission is still binding on Harvard, whose distinguished alumnus, John Adams, A.B. 1755, wrote it into the Massachusetts Constitution in 1780.

When was the last time anyone, politician or university president, echoed what Noah Webster said in 1788?
It is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.

What strikes us about these passages is not their antiquity, but their wisdom. Today, many Americans have lost pride in their government. At a time when universities trumpet their place in the world—and within Facebook—but say little about their place in the Republic, these calls to educate citizens who will sustain the nation have new and vital meaning. It is time to reimagine higher education's civic mission.

Higher education is now justified almost entirely by economic returns and the concomitant social returns. To be sure, as a government website proclaims, “Education Pays.” But the public purposes of education go beyond aggregated benefits to individu- als. Colleges and universities are repositories of culture as well as wellsprings of creativity. They are positioned not only to foster innovation, which is essential to national prosperity, but also to teach the public responsibilities associated with invention and entrepreneurship. They should give students the skills they need for personal success as well as the values, ideals, and civic virtues on which American democracy depends.

The need for civic education is urgent because so many aspects of our civic life have become dysfunctional. “A Republic, if you can keep it,” as Benjamin Franklin described our form of government, will not persist through momentum alone. What might colleges and universities do to reinvigorate their commitments to their public mission? As Harvard celebrates its 375th year, what might this great university do to breathe new life into civic education?

In what follows, we frame the problem and suggest approaches to a solution. As former Harvard deans, we hope to spark a conversation across the University’s schools and departments and, beyond Harvard, among colleagues at other institutions of higher education.

We see civic education as the cultivation of knowledge and traits that sustain democratic self-governance. The synergistic components of civic education in American colleges and universities are a tripod of intellect, morality, and action, all grounded in a knowledge base of American history and constitutional principles. Intellect means the capacity to analyze public problems with the dispassion of the scholar—curious about current events and able to subject them to rational analysis. Morality is the capacity to make and explain value judgments about concepts such as fairness, social justice, freedom, and equality, conceived as both democratic ideals and lived commitments. Finally, civic education instills the willingness and competence to take effective action on matters of public concern. Civic education cannot flourish if intellect is privileged over morality and action, as is usual today. The time has come for universities again to embrace all sides of their public mission.

The Inadvertent Decline of Civic Education

At old colleges like Harvard, moral philosophy, with civic education a major component, was once a capstone course required of all seniors. But the subject went into decline after the Civil War, as science became ascendant and universities gave preeminence to research. As science either marginalized or helped transform other subjects, citizens' responsibilities for the public good were squeezed out of the mission of higher education. Moral philosophy became a marginal specialty within philosophy departments. At Amherst College, for example, the president still taught moral philosophy to all seniors in 1895; by 1905, it was but a single elective offering.

At the same time, professionalization in the academic disciplines splintered formerly unified interests in social problems. Sociologists might study the neighborhood origins of poverty, while economists investigated ways to measure it. Social science also became increasingly separate from social work, the former being reserved for (usually male) scholars, the latter for (usually female) field workers. In the academic pecking order, deliberately amoral scientific fields dominated deliberately altruistic service fields. In a university of specialized professors, nobody was left to instill in students a sense of the common good.

As knowledge fragmented, professional expertise empowered the professoriate. Faculty members came to identify less with their institutions and more with their academic guilds. Their disciplinary specialization trumped their educational roles. Even when colleges like Harvard tried to push back by fostering teaching centers and small seminars, the real rewards were for subject-centered expertise, not for civic mentoring. As national and international networks of academics developed, professors' power rivaled that of presidents and trustees. A market for top talent developed as professors became mobile. By the late 1960s, American higher education had become the envy of the world, preeminent in science and invention—but at a price: colleges no longer met or even recognized their once central responsibility for the moral development of their students.

Four Reactions to the Civic-Education Vacuum

During the past century, four very different movements have reasserted civic ideals in academia.

General education was intended to advance common values and defend liberal learning in the face of demographic diversification and academic professionalization. Distinct models developed, first at Columbia, then at the University of Chicago, and, after World War II, at Harvard, all involving the study of “great books” or synthetic approaches to the humanities, sciences, and social/behavioral sciences.

The student movement of the 1960s—although on the surface antagonistic to “general education”—expressed alienation widely felt among young people about injustice and commercialization in American society. Students found their university education...
shallow and soulless. Its antiauthoritarian agenda and tactics notwithstanding, the student movement sought to reassert the educational importance of common values and social mission.

The so-called culture wars began with publication of Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind in 1987. Bloom, a philosopher at the University of Chicago, and critics on the right, notably Lynne Cheney (then chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities) and Dinesh D'Souza (a journalist and policy analyst), argued passionately that preoccupations with diversity and academic fads had eclipsed old values and traditions of learning. From the left, philosopher Martha Nussbaum, historian Lawrence Levine, and others faulted the evidence and logic of these defenders of “the canon,” claiming that college curricula should have always had a role in fostering and criticizing national ideals. Every class in biological science points toward questions of human welfare and destiny. The politics of the Roman republic still offer lessons for our own. Without compromising the mechanisms that ensure scholarly excellence, universities can reward professors for nourishing the practical, applied, “relevant” dimensions of their subjects.

Morality. Outside our houses of worship, the subject of morality causes discomfort on most college campuses. Academic professionalization drove the subject out of the portfolio of professors. The Closing of the American Mind has been the subject of much debate and discussion. Critics have argued that Bloom's ideas are elitist and narrow-minded. However, the book has also been seen as a response to the perceived decline of traditional values in American society.

Finding a Way Forward
How can civic education be given new life? We propose no course syllabus; we pitch no new campus civic center. In fact, universities may already be over-supplied with ad hoc gestures toward civic enlightenment. Neither designated courses in ethical reasoning, nor presidential bromides when freshmen arrive and seniors graduate, suffice to “inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government.” Indeed, such episodic nods to civics may only foster cynicism. Instead of a prescription, we offer a framework for conversation about the intertwined roles of intellect, morality, and action. We hope this framework will be useful at a variety of institutions, including Harvard.

Intellec. Colleges and universities are defined by their commitment to study. Although extracurricular and residential experiences can be highly valued, activities with an academic dimension are most respected in academic circles. They “count.” Nor can effective civic education be relegated to a corner of students' academic experience. To be embraced as a primary purpose of the college experience, civic education needs to be spread across the curriculum.

Natural opportunities arise everywhere. Every academic, professional, or vocational field of study can stimulate reflection on issues of political or social importance. Every sociology course raises questions about the nature of civil society. The dramatic arts co-evolve with American culture. Gerald Graff of the University of Illinois, in his influential book Beyond the Culture Wars, may have carried the day when he urged teaching the conflicts themselves as a means to foster an “informed citizenry.”

In the mid 1980s, yet another movement to promote civic engagement began to appear on campuses across the country. Service learning flourished mostly as an extracurricular encouragement to civic activity among undergraduates. Organizations such as Campus Compact, which supports community service at more than a thousand institutions, and City Year, which offers volunteer work before or after college, have helped build a strong culture of youth volunteerism.

Each of these movements embodied admirable commitments to public purposes. Some, such as the “culture wars,” faded quickly. Others were overwhelmed by the very forces they were intended to oppose. General education continues in its classic form at Columbia and St. John's, but elsewhere devolved into distribution requirements under pressure from faculty disciplinary priorities. Service learning helped recruit a large number of undergraduates into volunteer work, but professors continue to occupy a parallel universe largely untouched by calls to service. And the immediacy of service experience may not always result in a lasting, thoughtful commitment to social progress, as this incident, reported in a 2003 Carnegie Foundation study, suggests:

A student volunteering at a soup kitchen...very much enjoyed the experience and felt that it had made him a better person. Without thinking through the implications of his statement, he said, “I hope it is still around when my children are in college, so they can work here, too.”

Universities are themselves important agents in American society. University leaders can use announcements of important policies and decisions as vehicles for civic education. Students should be as important an audience as alumni, donors, the media, and Washington when universities explain what they are doing and
why. Moreover, universities can teach by commenting openly on institutional news that is being discussed anyway—even when it is embarrassing. Silence signals that a university can’t tell right from wrong, or doesn’t care which it is advancing; awkward spin control suggests that academic speech is no more credible than commercial or political advertising.

As we have indicated, we do not believe there is “one best way” forward. However, we offer three suggestions to begin restoring civic education as a central purpose of higher education.

- **Integrate civic education into core requirements and concentrations or majors.** In every field, faculty members care most about the subjects in which they were trained and are expert—and the university’s culture of expertise is far too valuable to compromise. Professors will best offer civic education when it is fused into the courses about their specializations. That is where they can speak from experience about the relation of their work to the problems of the world. Senior members of departments might explore and model for their junior colleagues the integration of academic and civic teaching within their field. Like any other educational reform, this one will not be successful without adjustments to the incentive and reward system for faculty in order to recognize their contributions to the institution’s civic mission.

- **Long-term, global thinking as a university-wide aim.** It is not enough for great universities to talk grandly of a “global mission.” Students today, especially undergraduates, are focused on next steps, especially getting a job and paying off student loans. Without trivializing those concerns, universities can balance them with frequent university-wide and department-specific lectures, discussions, exhibitions, and credit-bearing classes that teach one clear lesson: You are responsible not only for your own future, but also for the future of the world. A grand challenge to higher education today is to give powerful, personal meaning to the clichés rephrasing that lesson. How can colleges and universities translate “Think globally, act locally” into terms that will move every graduate?

- **Modeling civic engagement throughout the institution.** Institutions teach through their policies and practices, their governance and organization—through everything they do, every day. No college will be successful in renewing its civic mission unless its operations embody its values. At Harvard, this would entail scrutiny of accountability mechanisms for administrative centers, from the governing boards through Massachusetts Hall to the allied offices. Decision-making can be made more educational by making it more transparent, for everything from endowment management to wage structures, promotion decisions, and disciplinary procedures. Discrepancies between and among schools and departments that suggest priorities at odds with stated values will teach lessons if they are acknowledged, and either explained or remedied.

Implementing these recommendations would be contentious. Legal liabilities can limit institutional transparency. Secrecy is necessary sometimes, if not nearly as often as it is practiced. More often than not, open discussion of the difficulties would be constructive. The arguments about specifics would expose to healthy debate latent disagreements about the ultimate purposes of a university.

Failing to reinvigorate the civic mission of our colleges and universities carries a high price: it will put at risk the well-being of our nation and the world, perhaps not tomorrow but in decades to come. We believe that like-minded people among us, at Harvard and elsewhere, can come together to mobilize change. With the support and example of higher education, current dismay over political polarization and skepticism about human progress can give way to the civic idealism that has always characterized the American experiment at its best.

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