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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

A New Era of Civic Engagement? The History and Future of Pragmatic Higher Education in the United States

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Abstract

This essay examines the history and potential future trajectory of civic engagement in higher education in the United States, analysing this pedagogical approach through the lens of the philosophical theory and tradition of pragmatism. Through a brief history and analysis of pragmatism, this article posits that this philosophical approach offers tools for responding to the current crisis of declining public trust in higher education in the United States. Aimed at higher education leaders and scholars who seek a stronger theoretical vocabulary for institutional change, this essay advocates for adopting the pragmatist model as the framework for recentring civic engagement as a core mission of higher education institutions.

Keywords

Pragmatism; Civic Engagement; Higher Education; John Dewey

Introduction

Higher education institutions in the United States have focused on promoting civic engagement among students to varying degrees throughout their 400-year history, and the issue again stands at a crossroads. This essay explores the historical and philosophical influences that have shaped the relationship between civic engagement and universities, and the steps that education leaders in the United States may take to incorporate civic engagement

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into a future vision for higher education, particularly during this time of extraordinary public distrust in higher education institutions. Specifically, I link civic engagement pedagogy to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, which evaluates the value of ideas based on their practical applications and ability to inform action. I argue that pragmatism should serve as a guiding framework for shaping the mission and goals of higher education institutions.

By exploring the historical application of pragmatism to educational settings by theorists such as John Dewey, I do not intend to merely offer a nostalgic understanding of American educational institutions as dedicated entirely to civic goals during some idealised historical period. Instead, I propose that pragmatism should be applied as a method for evaluating and designing contemporary civic engagement initiatives in higher education, and I use the historical application of pragmatism to provide background for civic engagement scholars looking to apply this method. This article contributes to current conversations about the declining public trust in higher education in the United States by arguing that pragmatism provides a useful framework for analysing higher education's pressing problems and the solutions that universities are proposing to regain the public's trust.

In this essay, civic engagement within higher education refers to curricular and co-curricular activities that develop students' civic identity and prepare them for formal and informal participation in the democratic process. This concept also refers to research cocreated with community organisations and policymakers to produce knowledge for the public good ([Benson et al., 2017](#); [Boyte & Hollander, 1999](#); [Hartley, 2009](#)). This broad definition of civic engagement includes pedagogical approaches such as service-learning, character development and community engagement ([Saltmarsh, 2011](#)). It must be noted that community or civic engagement is not inherently democratic, but a contested family of practices. Community–university partnerships exist along a spectrum, as Shelly Arnstein analysed in her classic study, *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, in which she categorises different approaches to public engagement by their degree of authentic inclusion of communities, from 'non-participation' to 'tokenism', to 'citizen power' ([Arnstein, 1969](#)). This article advocates for civic engagement as a method for holding universities accountable to public interests (when conducted in a manner that truly considers and empowers community perspectives) whilst also recognising the dual importance of this method in preparing students to become active participants in democracy.

The civic engagement curriculum promotes critical thinking and self-reflection among students, and it values creative and collaborative problem-solving across disciplines and between scholars and practitioners. Practices for promoting civic engagement have varied across time and university contexts, but they typically include community-based practices such as volunteerism, service-learning (which integrates volunteerism with self-reflection and analysis through a curriculum) and community-engaged research (or research cocreated with community partners). Classroom approaches include debates, deliberation or inquiry-based learning that prompts students to apply theory to practical social issues ([Harkavy & Hartley, 2008](#)).

In the United States, a culturally diverse democracy, civic engagement entails collaboration with individuals from a broad array of ethnic, class and religious backgrounds. Increasing diversity within American universities themselves arguably helps accomplish the goal of developing civically engaged students by exposing students to diverse viewpoints and perspectives, preparing them for participation in a diverse democracy. This essay thus also discusses the establishment of public and land-grant universities as important developments in U.S. history that made higher education accessible to a broader public, although a civically engaged curriculum and research agendas that include collaboration with community partners remain the primary topic of this article.

This article builds upon the rich literature on civic and community engagement in U.S. higher education but offers a unique perspective on the history and future of that pedagogical approach by advocating for an application of the philosophical tradition of pragmatism to assess the current issues plaguing higher

education today. These issues include declining public trust in higher education, political polarisation, rising costs of higher education and the subsequent focus on attaining high-paying jobs as the primary purpose of higher education. Pragmatism has been called upon before to frame the purpose of higher education beyond credentialing and instrumental training, positioning it instead as a site for democratic hope, inquiry in public life and the cultivation of civic dispositions. Pragmatism gives higher education professionals a historically grounded method for rebuilding civic engagement without reducing education either to workforce preparation or to partisan formation. Its value lies not in nostalgia for a lost civic university but in its insistence that institutions test their ideals through public consequences, reciprocal partnerships and democratic habits of inquiry.

Civic Engagement in the History of U.S. Higher Education

The role of higher education in preparing students for active citizenship through a civically focused curriculum was recognised as early as the colonial era when Benjamin Franklin participated in the founding of the University of Pennsylvania. In his vision for the university, Franklin noted the importance of including students from various backgrounds – not simply elites – and teaching them civic values that would lead them to contribute to the public good ([Harkavy & Hartley, 2008](#)). This approach to education was nationalised through the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, which created the first land-grant universities across the country. This Act granted thousands of acres of public land (often seized from Native Americans) to states for the development of new universities, greatly increasing public access to higher education, particularly in the new Midwestern and Western states ([Joseph A. Myers Center for Research on Native American Issues and Native American Student Development, 2021](#); [The Morrill Act, 1862](#)). Carrying on Franklin's legacy, President Abraham Lincoln intended the Morrill Act to expand educational access to farmers and labourers, a goal he saw as essential to promoting social mobility, economic prosperity and healthy democracy ([Holzer & Garfinkle, 2015](#)), whilst ensuring that university research and curricula addressed public needs. Land-grant universities were meant 'to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life', and the mission of these universities was to provide technical training alongside 'scientific and classical studies' ([The Morrill Act, Sec. 4, 1862](#), p. 2).

However, whilst public and land-grant universities were expanding across the country in the late 1800s, slowly making higher education more accessible and utilitarian, another trend was occurring within academia that would undermine these attempts: specialisation, or the narrowing of research specialties and the retreat of researchers into disciplinary silos. This discipline-focused approach to research was imported into the United States through the German university model, which was viewed by some scholars as an ideal that the United States should attempt to emulate. Whilst it took decades to become the dominant model in U.S. universities, by the 1950s, narrow scientific research came to be seen as the key to securing the 'economic and political hegemony' of the United States in the post-WWII order ([Wilhite & Silver, 2005](#), p. 47).

This transition towards discipline-specific research contrasted with the promise of the land-grant and public education mission to address public needs, which often required interdisciplinary approaches ([O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006](#)). Instead of developing publicly engaged universities, the land-grant universities shifted towards focusing on graduate-level research and pursuing knowledge 'for its own sake, independent of social and political implications and civic obligations' ([Wilhite & Silver, 2005](#), p. 47). This history demonstrates that the purpose of higher education in the United States has long been contested. Higher education has been portrayed as both a public good (pursued through the cultivation of democratic citizens and training workers for the nation) and a private good (training individuals to outcompete each other in social standing) ([Labaree, 1997](#)). These conflicting forces have shaped higher education institutions

throughout their history and have contributed to the present crisis of declining public trust, unaffordability and devaluation of the humanities. American higher education has never been simply or consistently civic. Its democratic aspirations have always coexisted with exclusion, status competition, professional training, institutional self-interest and economic stratification. A reading of the dilemmas of higher education through a pragmatic lens can provide a framework for addressing these longstanding and contemporary challenges.

The Pragmatic Underpinnings of Civic Engagement

Pragmatism was described by psychologist William James (1842–1910) as a theory and method that determines the value of ideas by their practical applications and their ability to guide action. This theory rejects fixed principles and abstraction in favour of intellectual flexibility and concreteness of application ([James, 1907](#)). The pragmatic approach has been applied to various arenas, from governance to education, and across various international contexts ([Sagandilan et al., 2025](#); [Saito, 2017](#)). This section will review and analyse the evolution and adoption of pragmatism in the European and American settings, leading to its eventual application to the education system by John Dewey (1859–1952) and to the 20th-century civic and community engagement movement in higher education by Ernest Boyer (1928–1995).

As articulated by James in an 1898 presentation at the University of California, Berkeley, pragmatism placed value on ideas only insofar as they lead to beneficial consequences, determined through personal experience. James's focus on empiricism differed from other theories of philosophy by approaching ideas through a solutions-oriented stance, determining their worth through their efficacy in addressing practical issues. Rooted in experience, James's pragmatism devalued the notion of universal truth, instead valuing any idea that produced benefits in particular situations, which required creativity and adaptability to find and correctly apply ([James, 1898](#)).

James's pragmatism found resonance among a new generation of reformers. John Dewey, the early 20th-century American philosopher and education reformer, applied pragmatism towards the development of a new education model. Dewey believed that intelligence 'develops best as a result of reflective, strategic, real-world problem-solving action and experience' ([Benson et al., 2017](#), p. 51), and he emphasised the educative importance of being introduced to 'real things and materials, with the actual processes of their manipulation, and the knowledge of their social necessities and uses' ([Dewey, 1900](#), p. 8). Dewey's approach to education has been applied to various pedagogies, including project-based learning ([Kilpatrick, 1918](#)), cooperative learning ([Freire, 1970](#)) and experiential learning ([Kolb, 1984](#)). Although Dewey was focused on primary schools, his approach was eventually applied to the development of interdisciplinary, community-engaged pedagogy in higher education. Dewey believed that the value and truth of concepts are best understood through their practical application in society, a view he brought to education by arguing that students learn subject matter best through hands-on experiential learning and problem-based inquiry.

Dewey's educational vision was developed within, and for, the unique environment of the United States: a large, diverse democracy where children enter the educational system from various backgrounds, beliefs and upbringings. According to Dewey, collaborative, experiential education was not only appropriate but also essential to the success of American democracy and the cultivation of democratic citizens ([Dewey, 1909](#)). As Dewey stated in *Democracy and Education* (1916), 'Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class' (p. 226). Instead, educators must draw from the diverse experiences of their pupils in developing curricula and aim to promote collaborative leadership and civic engagement skills among all students, regardless of background. Dewey advocated for 'community schools', or schools that serve as social centres of communities that could bring residents together from across racial, economic and social lines, a practice in collaboration essential to a thriving

democracy ([Benson et al., 2017](#), p. xvii). Dewey aspired to repair the disconnect between the lessons taught in formal education and the lessons learned in everyday life by introducing problem-based and experiential learning curricula, applying a pragmatic approach to formal learning environments.

Dewey's pragmatic education model was influential for education reformers across the United States, including Myles Horton (1905–1990), who cofounded the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1932, an adult education centre focused on teaching and training students for civic engagement. Horton was inspired by Dewey, as well as by fellow Progressive Era American education reformers Joseph K. Hart and Eduard Lindeman. Hart and Lindeman found similarities between the pragmatic educational reform movement occurring in the United States and the Danish adult educational model (*folkehøjskole*) that had been created by Danish education reformer N.F.S. Grundtvig in the mid-19th century ([Hart, 1927](#); [Lindeman, 1926](#)). Often referred to as the father of modern Denmark, Grundtvig (1783–1872) advocated for experiential and collaboration-based education with the goal of promoting active citizenship, an approach that Progressive Era American education reformers such as Horton found appealing ([Horton & Friere, 1990](#); [Horton et al., 1990](#)). Horton eventually travelled to Denmark to experience this 'folk school' model first-hand, before returning to the United States to start Highlander. In the context of the American South in the mid-20th century, Horton focused his training centre on teaching non-violent resistance and demonstration, particularly in response to Jim Crow-era segregation laws. Highlander became well-known during the Civil Rights Movement as a space where African American civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., received education and training on non-violent protest. Horton's application of the pragmatic theory advocated by Dewey and expressed (although not explicitly named as such) by Grundtvig indicates the long international tradition of pragmatism and its malleability in different contexts ([Loberg, 2022](#)).

Echoes of this pragmatic approach to education can also be seen in the work and writings of the late 20th-century higher education reform advocate, Ernest Boyer. Boyer served as President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching from 1979 to 1995, where he advocated for community-engaged research and teaching aimed at addressing societal issues. [Boyer \(1996, p. 22\)](#) saw a civically engaged curriculum and research agenda as essential to serving public needs and to bolstering the public's confidence in higher education institutions. He noted that 'the confidence of the nation's campuses themselves has grown during those times when academics have been called upon to serve a larger purpose—to participate in the building of a more just society and to make the nation more civil and secure'. [Boyer \(1996, p. 23\)](#) argued that the universities of the 1990s had become too aloof and irrelevant to daily life: 'Increasingly, the campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation's most pressing civic, social, economic, and moral problems'. Boyer did not argue merely for more collaborative or problem-based learning inside the classroom. His 'scholarship of engagement' called on universities to connect their teaching, research and professional expertise to pressing social, civic, economic, ethical and moral problems beyond the campus. In this sense, Boyer anticipated subsequent community–university engagement frameworks by demanding that universities remain accountable to public interests.

Boyer's reflections were part of a larger call by education reformers of the 1980s and 1990s to refocus higher education on civic engagement. This effort was reflected in the founding of Campus Compact in 1985, a consortium of colleges and universities across the United States dedicated to promoting civic engagement in higher education ([Boyte & Hollander, 1999](#)). Boyer's advocacy for interdisciplinary, civically engaged teaching and research was rooted in the pragmatic philosophy, although modified to suit his particular context. The tools and methods of pragmatism can also be applied to the current environment of higher education in the United States, a context characterised by the loss of civic identity, declining cross-partisan dialogue and growing public distrust in institutions, including higher education.

Losing Confidence in Institutions

Public trust in major institutions in the United States, including higher education, has markedly declined in recent years. Polling by Gallup shows that confidence in higher education has fallen sharply, with the percentage of Americans reporting a 'great deal or quite a lot of confidence' dropping from 57 per cent in 2015 to 36 per cent in 2024. Gallup reports: 'Americans who lack confidence in higher education today say their concerns lie in colleges pushing political agendas, not teaching relevant skills, and being overly expensive' ([Jones, 2024](#), para. 4). This erosion of trust constitutes a serious challenge: waning confidence in higher education not only risks exacerbating existing social inequalities but also threatens the vitality of democracy, and thus, these complaints must be taken seriously by higher education leaders. Perceptions of political bias have been particularly damaging to public trust and have led to a race to define and shape the civic engagement curriculum along partisan lines by both right-leaning and left-leaning educators ([Douglas-Gabriel, 2025](#)). Such efforts, which align curricular decisions with the political controversies of the moment, undermine attempts to rebuild broad-based trust in higher education. They also increase the likelihood that some families will disengage from higher education altogether, a trend with profound consequences for social mobility and democratic participation. Whilst the pragmatic education model cannot, in itself, solve the issues of political polarisation, it can be used to guide classroom teaching methods (problem-based, experiential and community-engaged), even as the content (e.g., reading lists, themes and historical examples) of civic education remains hotly debated. An educational model that looks beyond simply teaching politically expedient content but instead invites students into structured dialogue, both with each other and with practitioners or community members, may provide space for different viewpoints to come to light.

Public concerns about the skills taught in universities and the increasing cost of attending universities are arguably related, as increasing tuition costs have meant that students and their parents expect universities to focus narrowly on technical training that will position students for high-paying jobs to justify their financial investment. However, higher education is meant to do more than prepare students for a first job; it provides critical problem-solving and collaboration skills that students can call upon throughout their adult lives ([Bender, 2013](#)). The public's narrowing perception of higher education institutions as primarily job training centres suggests a failure on the part of these institutions to effectively communicate or demonstrate their broader civic purpose, as well as a failure to address rising costs. The growing inaccessibility of universities due to increasing tuition rates has created disillusionment towards these institutions and again brought long-standing arguments about the public vs. private purposes of higher education to the fore. Those universities that promise social mobility (and historically delivered that mobility) increasingly reproduce inequality instead, as low-income students and their families are mired in debt and students increasingly fail to graduate ([Haveman & Smeeding, 2006](#); [Kelly, 2014](#)). This widening gap between higher education's civic promise and its lived reality contributes significantly to public disillusionment and declining trust.

In addition to efforts to reduce the cost of higher education, this moment calls for faculty, administrators and staff to commit to civically engaged education that resonates with a broader segment of the population and responds to pressing public issues. When past generations questioned the public purpose of education, dating back to Benjamin Franklin's lifetime, educators have emphasised its practical and society-enhancing aims, including social mobility, collaboration and the cultivation of a healthy democracy ([Harkavy & Hartley, 2008](#); [Holzer & Garfinkle, 2015](#)). Whilst the strengthening of democracy might never have been the sole justification for higher education's existence, this public purpose has always existed alongside the goal of individual economic advancement. The pragmatic educational philosophy advanced by reformers such as Dewey, Horton and Boyer highlights the essential relationship between education and democracy and provides a framework for a more civically engaged educational model that remains deeply relevant and urgently needed today. If public trust is damaged by perceptions that universities are politically insulated,

self-serving and practically irrelevant, then proposed reforms to higher education must be evaluated by whether they change those dynamics. A pragmatist approach would ask not only whether an institution offers civic engagement courses or holds a classification. It would ask whether community partners experience the university as more accountable, whether students learn to deliberate across differences, whether faculty inquiry changes in response to public problems and whether institutional incentives shift towards durable community partnerships. The next section will analyse possible reforms to higher education through a pragmatic framework.

Possible Futures for Civic Engagement

The challenges of the 21st century necessitate a renewed focus on civic engagement in higher education, including climate change, economic inequality and public health crises. These complex challenges, referred to as ‘wicked problems’ by [Rittel and Webber \(1973, p. 160\)](#), are multifaceted and evolving and require collaboration across different areas of expertise to address them. For example, climate scientists are increasingly promoting interdisciplinary research partnerships, community engagement and science communication to more effectively address the wicked problem of climate change ([Achiam et al., 2024](#); [Vitting-Seerup et al., 2024](#)). These global challenges require research outputs that reach beyond disciplinary silos and technical training and promote collaboration and problem-solving skills to enhance the impact of university research ([Ramaley, 2014](#)).

Complex global challenges are exacerbated by the decline of democratic values and institutions. In the United States, this decline is demonstrated through increasing partisanship, politically motivated violence and public disillusionment with democracy, which pose challenges to higher education institutions. Universities can combat this threat by recentring civic engagement as crucial to their educational mission ([Hulbert & Harkins, 2024](#); [Jennings et al., 2021](#)). Dewey’s pragmatic approach to education (one that combines technical skill development with group collaboration and interdisciplinary problem-solving) can offer a guide to strengthening democracy by infusing civic identity-building into the higher education curriculum.

Introducing curricular and co-curricular programs that emphasise community engagement is a significant challenge for institutions facing budget cuts and pressure from state and federal agencies to demonstrate their value primarily through graduates’ income levels. Nevertheless, it is precisely in this context that the pragmatist tradition offers a compelling outline for reform and a guiding framework for public engagement professionals to use when navigating the competing goals of higher education. The history of pragmatism offers a glimpse into past efforts at making the link between education and democracy more explicit and provides practical pedagogical approaches that respond to contemporary demands. These approaches include problem-based, experiential and community-engaged learning and align with current calls for curricula that prepare students to address complex societal challenges ([Brant et al., 2022](#); [Bender, 2001](#)). Pragmatism also offers a philosophical framework through which to analyse potential future strategies that higher education can use to reclaim its civic mission. In this section, I will analyse a contemporary example of institutional reform, a historical example of curriculum reform with potential for future applications and an example of administrative support that can help institutionalise a pragmatic, civically engaged approach to higher education going forward.

A pragmatist future for civic engagement requires three mutually reinforcing reforms. First, institutional self-assessment that inspires experimentation rather than simply providing branding material: universities need mechanisms that ask not only whether they claim civic purpose but also whether their practices produce reciprocal public value. Second, pedagogical formation that teaches democratic habits rather than merely civic content: students need repeated, structured opportunities to practise democratic dialogue with people unlike themselves, not merely to learn civic concepts in abstraction. Third, boundary-spanning

infrastructure that turns episodic engagement into durable institutional reform: community engagement cannot depend only on heroic faculty, temporary grants or charismatic leaders; it requires durable roles that connect classrooms, research agendas, community partners and administrative decision-making. The Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, the Danish folk school tradition and the incorporation of boundary-spanning roles into university infrastructure are promising reforms to higher education because each addresses one of these levels. Each also has weaknesses and limitations that must be addressed if these reforms are to succeed in making higher education institutions more publicly accountable.

Educational organisations have developed a range of initiatives in recent decades to incentivise civically engaged and community-engaged teaching and learning at the institutional level. One prominent example is the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, an elective designation introduced in 2006 to recognise universities that demonstrate a commitment to community engagement. Issued by the same organisation that awards research classifications (R1, R2, etc.), the community engagement classification provides institutions with a structured process for assessing their current efforts and identifying opportunities for improvement. Universities may use the application process to inform the development of community-engaged courses, revise tenure and promotion criteria to value engagement, or establish offices dedicated to supporting community-engaged faculty and cultivating community partnerships. In these ways, the initiative can offer meaningful incentives and practical tools for expanding institutional engagement and supporting the civic development of students.

At the same time, several factors affect the reach of the classification. Because participation is voluntary, the designation tends to attract institutions (and particularly institutional leaders) already inclined to prioritise community engagement, rather than motivating widespread change across the sector. The application process is also resource-intensive, often requiring dedicated staff, extensive documentation and sustained data collection over the course of a year or more, making it a difficult project to justify in the face of budget cuts across the sector. Moreover, the assessment criteria remain broad, which offer flexibility but can also create ambiguity about how to best evaluate an institution's civic and community engagement efforts ([Holton et al., 2020](#)).

From a pragmatic framework perspective, the Carnegie Classification should be analysed for its utility over its prestige: whether pursuing the classification genuinely improves teaching, research and community partnerships, or if it functions merely as a symbolic badge of honour for marketing and institutional branding. The literature on these questions is currently limited, and little of it is causal: most studies are conceptual, descriptive, case-based or based on self-reported application materials rather than external measures of community impact. Direct evidence that the classification increases a university's number of community partnerships or public responsiveness is therefore suggestive, not definitive; the current literature shows stronger evidence for reporting, prestige and some organisational outcomes than for measured community-level effects. However, the application process is refined after each classification cycle and more data are collected each year that the classification is offered, offering opportunities for the classification to become more responsive to community needs and for the collection of data from each cycle to definitively demonstrate the long-term effectiveness of classification on improving community–university partnerships ([Pearl et al., 2025](#)).

A pragmatist reading affirms Carnegie's emphasis on reciprocity, partnership and institutional self-assessment. However, it also asks whether classification produces institutional learning or merely records existing activity. Pragmatism presses civic engagement to move from documentation to experimentation, from recognition to revision and from institutional self-description to shared inquiry with communities. Because the classification operates within a status-conscious higher education system, it risks being absorbed into the very culture it seeks to reform. Its effectiveness as an approach to institutional reform will become clearer as additional data are collected from its applicants, although its risks and limitations remain an ongoing concern. The Carnegie Classification represents one tool within the broader landscape of

community-engagement initiatives, but additional approaches should be explored to make universities more relevant to the public.

Another approach that aligns with a pragmatic vision of civic engagement in higher education can be found in a historical example: the aforementioned folk school model developed by N.F.S. Grundtvig in Denmark and later introduced to the United States by Danish–American immigrants and social reformers such as Myles Horton. Rooted in Grundtvig’s concept of a ‘school for life’, the folk school tradition emphasises the holistic development of learners into democratic citizens rather than the acquisition of discrete, employment-oriented skills ([Broadbridge, 2011](#); [Holm, 2019](#)). Designed primarily for adult students, these schools foster community through practices such as collective singing, dialogue-based learning and project-based activities, and they famously operate without grades. The model has been credited with contributing to Denmark’s robust democratic institutions and vibrant civic culture ([Klein, 2018](#)).

The folk school tradition offers a different kind of pragmatist resource than Carnegie. Carnegie addresses institutional recognition and assessment; folk schools address formation. Their deepest contribution is the insistence that democratic life is learned through repeated practices of speech, listening, memory, bodily presence, conflict and common work. For higher education institutions, the point is not to import the framework and principles of Danish folk schools in their entirety into American universities. The point is to retrieve design principles: learning organised around lived problems, faculty as facilitators of inquiry rather than only transmitters of expertise, evaluation through group reflection rather than grades alone and education aimed at the formation of civic agency rather than only credential accumulation.

When Danish immigrants established folk schools in the United States beginning in the late 19th century, the model was adjusted to reflect local needs and priorities within the American context. Today, American folk schools remain small but diverse: some provide hobby-based or craft-focused classes, whilst others (such as the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee) focus explicitly on civic engagement and democratic participation ([Bodene-Yost, 2013](#); [Eiben, 2015](#)). Although distinct from traditional university structures, incorporating elements of the folk school tradition into higher education could provide a pathway for strengthening civic engagement. Universities might, for example, design required courses on democratic dialogue modelled on Highlander’s training programs. Universities could implement a first-year or upper-division seminar co-taught by faculty and community partners around local problems, for example, housing, water, climate adaptation, loneliness, migration or food systems. Universities could introduce short, immersive programs or internships modelled on folk school settings, bringing students, local residents, public officials and practitioners into structured dialogue and shared work. Universities could implement annual campus–community gatherings where problems are named by community partners before courses and research projects are designed. Folk school activities create opportunities for participants to practise the trust, disagreement, mutual recognition and practical judgment that democratic life requires. Folk schools do not offer a perfect model to replicate in American universities due to their origin in the culturally homogenous and small country of Denmark, their traditional location outside of the formal education system and their historical emphasis on social skills building over learning assessments. However, by drawing on the relevant lessons of this historically rich yet underutilised model, institutions may discover innovative approaches to civic education that complement and extend existing engagement efforts.

Uplifting a civic engagement-focused educational model will require curricular, co-curricular and research reforms, as well as university leadership that centres on the cultivation of civic identity in the university’s mission. Pragmatism can offer a framework and philosophical underpinning for scholars, but the structure of the higher education system must also undergo reforms to become more supportive of interdisciplinary, community-engaged approaches. In recent years, literature on improving and assessing community engagement in universities has highlighted the roles of *boundary spanners*, or those staff/academic crossover roles that can serve to create interdisciplinary connections across university departments,

units or community partners ([Weerts & Sandman, 2010](#)). Expanding boundary-spanning roles and offices in universities will bring in necessary personnel who will bridge disciplinary silos by developing cross-disciplinary faculty training programs and facilitating university–community partnerships. These professionals (sometimes called ‘third space’ professionals to indicate their role outside of traditional teaching or administrative roles) can also introduce or assess an experiential learning curriculum or develop opportunities for students to participate in civically engaged activities within their communities ([Whitchurch, 2015](#)).

This expansion of ‘third mission’ positions offers a pragmatic solution to the problem of insular university research. These staff members can work closely with faculty members and other researchers to facilitate external partnerships and provide training on ethics and strategies of reciprocal collaboration. Boundary spanners are not merely administrative coordinators adding another layer of bureaucracy to the university infrastructure. They are facilitators of shared inquiry across institutional and community boundaries. Their work is to help faculty, students and community partners move from good intentions to durable practices: jointly defining problems, negotiating expectations, tracking consequences, translating between forms of expertise and revising partnerships when evidence shows harm, imbalance or ineffectiveness. This role matters because community engagement is structurally fragile. Faculty rotate in and out of courses, students graduate, and grants end. Community partners experience institutional fatigue when each new project begins as if no prior relationship existed. Boundary spanners can provide institutional memory. They can know which partnerships have been harmful, which have been durable, which communities are overburdened and which faculty need preparation before entering public engagement work. They are a practical answer to an important question in civic engagement: How does engagement become cumulative rather than episodic?

For these professionals to have a lasting impact, university leadership would need to prioritise these positions, providing stable jobs and career advancement opportunities within the university staff infrastructure. These roles are being established in a growing number of universities, both within the United States and internationally, and have been implemented into the university staff and research structure in different ways in each context, for example, as offices serving university-wide or as department- or college-rooted centres focused on a particular research theme or collection of disciplines. In recent years, researchers have begun analysing the roles of boundary spanners, including best practices for these staff to facilitate university–community partnerships and train faculty or students on civic engagement pedagogy, and even the best positions within the university infrastructure from which to conduct this work ([Farnell, 2020](#); [Grant & Kennie, 2024](#); [Moriau et al., 2024](#); [Whitchurch, 2023](#)). Additional research and experimentation are needed, but the establishment of these roles offers a potential tool for carving new pathways within university structures that can advance transdisciplinary civic engagement goals.

Finding an effective framework for recentring civic engagement in educational institutions is a timely discussion; civic organisations and academic associations across the United States are hard at work developing best practices for incorporating civic engagement into university infrastructure in response to growing recognition of the dearth of civic knowledge and skills among students, and the lack of university accountability to public needs ([Bridgeland et al., 2024](#)). Reviewing the history of civic engagement in higher education can provide perspective by moving beyond current partisan debates over curriculum content to identify enduring ideas and approaches that remain relevant in today’s context. This essay has argued that the philosophical theory and approach of pragmatism offer a historical example of, and a contemporary model for, recentring civic engagement in university curricula, particularly in response to current crises in U.S. higher education. Our current moment is defined by complex global challenges, declining democratic values and growing distrust in higher education. Refocusing on broad civic training in higher education can give students the tools to engage directly with diverse members of their communities and within their democratic institutions, strengthening participatory democracy and improving mutual

trust and collaboration (Innes et al., 2016). This training does not have to come at the expense of technical skill development but instead can enhance it: students who develop collaborative problem-solving and communication skills as an integral part of their higher education training are better equipped to apply their technical expertise to affect meaningful change in their communities.

Whilst there are many types of activities that fall under the umbrella term ‘civic engagement’, pragmatism can serve to unite these activities into an overarching pedagogical approach and offer a framework for analysing the efficacy of those activities. This philosophy can provide theoretical common ground and shared language for civic engagement advocates. Higher education professionals can apply the principles of pragmatism towards reforming universities’ insular infrastructure, thereby showing that universities can not only produce knowledge but can also be changed by the public with whom that knowledge is made.

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