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Researching for Democracy and Democratizing Research

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From the SelectedWorks of Frances Ansley

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RESEARCHING *for* DEMOCRACY

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DEMOCRATIZING RESEARCH

BY FRAN ANSLEY AND JOHN GAVENTA

he research mission of higher education has long been considered important to democracy. Research on scientific, economic, social, and other issues is essential to framing public policy and contributing to public discourse. While some argue that the university should be insulated from real-world problems, increasingly universities are being called upon to apply their vast knowledge and research resources to the solution of critical societal problems.

Serious difficulties face universities that set out to do so. University research is more and more offered to the highest bidder, whether in business or government. Research done on behalf of civil society rather than for the state or market is rare, not least because funding for it is also rare. This is a major challenge to higher education. To respond to this challenge successfully, universities will have to do more than shift their research priorities. Researching for democracy also implies democratizing research, a shift that poses a fundamental challenge to many university-based researchers. At the heart of the problem of linking research and democracy is not only the question, "Whose voices are strengthened by university research?" but also, "Who participates in research in the first place?"

We are all familiar with the conventional paradigm of research. In this view, research is largely the business of experts trained in specialized domains of knowledge. Experts study the problems of others, striving to maintain a posture of objectivity

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and distance from their research subjects. Scholars reap rewards not for contributions to community or civic life but for contributions to an expert knowledge base. Their work is judged by professional peers, and publication in refereed disciplinary journals is taken to be the most reliable indicator of quality.

Such an approach to research, of course, does little to strengthen participation in civic life. In the social sciences, the job of the people being studied is to be the object of another's inquiry. Those who draw their understanding from experience—from living and engaging in real-world issues—may find their knowledge dismissed as too subjective. Those who struggle with the messy interconnectedness of real-world problems may find their ideas recast into narrow disciplinary terms and esoteric debates in which they cannot participate. Ultimately, a knowledge system that discredits and devalues common, everyday knowledge serves to disempower common people as well. Such a system represents a contradiction for any vision of democracy that values the participation of people themselves in key deliberations and decisions that affect their lives.

EMERGING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODS

Fortunately, we are witnessing the emergence of models that promote more democratic methods of inquiry, more reciprocal relationships between researchers and their subjects, and new collaborations between research institutions and communities. There are several strands of what some are beginning to call a new research paradigm. They go under a number of different labels: participatory research or participatory action research, collaborative research, participatory inquiry, and practitioner research, to name just a few.

Feminist researchers have brought into the open the inevitability of subjectivity in the research process. Urban and rural planners have learned that the use of peoples' knowledge

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often makes for better research to support community planning. Researchers from communities of color have pointed out that questions of power and control are particularly acute in the settings in which they work, given the troubled past relationship between race and the research enterprise. Environmental scientists have found that people who experience environmental health problems have a wealth of relevant knowledge, and are often the first to suggest the causal links that are eventually shown to be harming their health and livelihoods. Poverty lawyers are learning that local fact-gathering for the support of legal claims often produces greater long-term benefit than fancy litigation-oriented research projects carried out by distant or visiting experts.

The movement for a different, more democratic research model is global. In developing countries, participatory methods have led to a new appreciation of the value and richness of indigenous knowledge. In England and Australia, the value of practitioner knowledge is transforming how research is done in the field of education and teacher training. Organizers of a World Congress on Participatory Research to be held in Colombia in 1997 have identified over 40 new approaches to research. The approaches have certain common themes:

• the development of a new role for researchers, who do not simply mine facts "objectively" but facilitate joint and reciprocal work;

• a recognition of the part that grassroots reflection and inquiry have played in the development of knowledge;

• an insistence that research be linked not only to the process of knowledge-building but also to education and action, especially for less powerful people.

While these approaches have been around for many years, they have typically been located at the margins of mainstream academia. Now these methods are being embraced by major institutions. The World Bank, long a bastion of traditional expertise about development, has begun to mandate that participatory forms of research be used in the planning and assessing of some development programs. New government programs in the United States are asking that grassroots communities participate in setting research priorities.

Examples include the Urban Community Service Program in the Department of Education; the Environmental Justice Community/University Partnership program in the Environmental Protection Agency; and the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) program in the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The COPC program at HUD is one of several that are administered by that agency's new Office of University Partnerships. HUD has initiated university-community centers at urban universities throughout the nation. Projects funded by these programs work with individuals, local governments, large and small businesses, and a range of non-profit community groups.

The question is no longer whether the new research approaches enjoy intellectual legitimacy. While they are hardly universally embraced, they are now accepted as one choice—and sometimes the best choice—among research alternatives. Mainstream academic journals have begun to devote special issues to the theme of participation in research, and have begun to address "second-generation" questions, such as how to gauge the quality and genuineness of projects that aspire to be participatory and what institutional forms can best support them.

INSTITUTION-BUILDING FOR THE NEW RESEARCH

We are witnessing a blossoming of institution-building around the new approaches to research. At many universities, new programs and centers have emerged; they exist in various settings and take many different forms. A few examples convey their range and character:

• The **Policy Research and Action Group** (PRAG) is a consortium in which researchers from four Chicago universities (Chicago State University, DePaul University, Loyola University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Chicago) work with Chicago community organizations. Formed in 1989, the network is noteworthy for its consciously "community-driven" character. PRAG matches researchers with community organizations, develops research apprentices within the organizations, and funds policy research projects identified and collaboratively designed by the organizations.

• Beyond taking researchers into the community, the **Community Scholars Program** at UCLA brings community members onto campus. With joint sponsorship from the Urban Planning Program and the Center for Labor Education and Research, participants from grassroots community organizations and labor unions all over Los Angeles attend classes in urban planning while carrying out a group research project on some aspect of community welfare in the city. Projects include economic development strategies, such as tourism, manufacturing, community banking, and worker ownership.

• The **Center for Community Partnerships** at the University of Pennsylvania puts special emphasis on linking academic research to the university's service obligations. The center has created a seminar for graduate students whose research focuses on community-academic interaction in Philadelphia, promoted a network of collaborations with several inner-city community schools near campus, organized a faculty symposium on participatory action research, and helped to develop and support numerous courses that involve collaborative and participatory research.

• Planning schools at many universities have a long history of working with community groups, and they have spawned a variety of centers and programs that feature research as a central component. For instance, the **Center for Community Planning** at the University of Massachusetts Boston is currently working with the Roofless Women's Action Research

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Mobilization, a group of formerly homeless activists who build on their own knowledge base to document the experiences of homeless women and to propose policies.

• Some law schools put students and faculty into community settings where they carry out legal and empirical research, often in connection with clinical course offerings. Faculty and students at **Harvard Law School** work with community-based partner groups, using participatory methods to investigate environmental justice and welfare reform in Massachusetts. Law faculty organizers of community economic development clinics at **SUNY–Buffalo** and **Yale** have worked on interdisciplinary research and action projects related to development goals of client groups.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

As co-founders of the Community Partnership Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), a large land-grant institution, we have begun to try out some new research relationships and new research methods linking our campus with the community.

Our activities fall primarily into three categories. First, the center serves as a clearinghouse for people and information, linking UTK researchers and teachers with low- and moderate-income communities in Knoxville and East Tennessee. Second, we work with university faculty and community partners to provide training for graduate and professional students, and have attracted a strong group of visiting faculty from across

campus and from other institutions. Since the center began in 1994, we have sponsored an interdisciplinary graduate seminar on collaborative approaches to research and community development.

Last year, a number of "community fellows" also elected to participate in the seminar, bringing invaluable real-world experience to the project. Graduate and professional students from the social sciences, law, and other disciplines have worked together with community groups to carry out field projects on needs identified by community groups. Students in the seminar have collected oral histories of communities and civic organizations, investigated economic development practices in specific locations, carried out surveys on the impact of health care reform, and gathered first-person accounts to help with the evaluation of a new micro-lending program in Knoxville's inner city.

Third, the center offers university researchers and commu-

nity partner groups a context in which to undertake long-term research collaborations of their own, usually with the support of external funds. The center has become involved in several research-community collaborations that developed around the Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community (EZ/EC) program, the largest federal anti-poverty initiative of this decade. Our involvement in the program began when the center was still in its infancy, when a nearby rural community in East Tennessee asked us for assistance in developing an application to gain a coveted EZ or EC designation from Washington. As we got involved and heard from other communities similarly engaged in our area, we realized that the program—which had announced a commitment to community-based partnerships and collaboration—was already stimulating broad-based citizen participation at the application stage.

We saw the moment as an opportunity for new collaboration

The Jacksonville Community Council, a broad-based civic organization, examined public services in Jacksonville, Florida, to determine if they were distributed fairly. The research resulted in an annual "equity index" that shows the distribution of public services and has prompted the Sheriff's Office to implement a new Sector System for more equitable police patrol services.

The Policy Research Action Group (PRAG) is a consortium in which researchers from four Chicago universities work with community activists. Its members describe it as "a network within which community stereotypes about aloof academic researchers pursuing esoteric, irrelevant research projects have broken down. At the same time academic stereotypes about community organizations have also been erased....By more actively bringing the community into the research process and not treating 'community' merely as a place to do research, a source of data, or a variable to be manipulated, the PRAG model represents an alternative to much traditional academic discipline-based research."

In one of its recent under-takings, PRAG found a student intern to work with a local group called the Mutual Aid Associations of Chicago Collaborative. The intern designed a survey to obtain data on the health-care needs of refugee women in Chicago. This research helped Mutual Aid start a women's health program that gives refugee women greater access to health services.

The Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens (YCCC) of Middlesboro, Kentucky, used door-to-door organizing, complex litigation, and old-time political campaigning to clean up a creek that was causing severe damage to livestock and humans, and to seek a health-monitoring fund that could help them track and respond to the long-term health effects of water pollution in their community. Crucial to their years-long campaign were research projects initiated and controlled by local citizens. YCCC conducted "popular epidemiology" studies on health effects and carried out grassroots data collection to document changing pollution levels of the creek. The group is now planning a book to document the story, with special emphasis on how mem-bers were able to remain in control of their campaign even after legal and technical experts became involved. Law students from the University of Tennessee have helped YCCC with archival work to document the history of the group's successful lawsuit.

After his article on technology and democracy appeared in the March 31, 1995 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, author Richard Sclove received an avalanche of mail from correspondents wanting to talk about community-linked research and the role of universities within it. Sclove directs the Loka Institute, a nonprofit group that has worked since 1987 on issues of science, technology, and democracy. He eventually decided to invite those who had written him to join an electronic discussion group on "the democratic politics of science and technology."

In the summer of 1996, after almost a year of conversation, information-sharing, and debate via the electronic discussion group, the Loka Institute and members of the group organized a conference on community research at UMass Amherst, co-sponsored by that university's Science, Technol-ogy & Society Program and its Agricultural Extension program. The National Community Research Network was launched at that conference. It will link centers focused on community research, both on and off campus.

Faculty researchers at the Center for Research on Women at the University of Memphis are in the early stages of creating a new Southern Women's Research Initiative. They have decided to build in community collaboration from the start by creating a regional advisory board of community leaders and activists involved in efforts to further women's well-being. Director Barbara Smith says, "At the Center, we want to be sure that we devote our limited research resources to projects and issues that matter to the women at the heart of our mission. In the South today, working women and their organizations are struggling to understand and respond to the impacts of economic restructuring and complex global change. We need guidance from women in the field about how we should define our research priorities to best cooperate with them in that endeavor." ∽

between university-based researchers and low-income community residents, and we helped one community assemble and analyze the input from local residents who attended public planning meetings for the county's application. This community was not successful in the stiff national competition for EZ/EC designation. Nevertheless, the ties built and the opportunities glimpsed during the application process inspired UTK leaders to institutionalize a "gateway" between the university and low-income communities in our immediate neighborhood and in the region; the experience has shaped the way we work with communities.

In Knoxville, the center was able to identify 17 different research or technical-assistance partnerships that could link the university and community-based groups in the five areas that residents had earlier identified as key needs during the City of Knoxville's application for EZ/EC status: community eco-nomic development, housing and homelessness, public safety, education and job training, and strengthening community organizations. The center then secured support for these projects from the COPC program at HUD.

Not all of our research collaborations are local. For instance, our center was approached by officials of the United States Department of Agriculture to help design an evaluation for the rural part of the EZ/EC program. With support from the USDA and the Ford Foundation, the Community Partnership Center teamed up with other researchers in the regions where these EZ and EC communities were concentrated to assess the early implementation of the program. The researchers have continued working in 10 pilot communities with local "learning teams" of community representatives, who monitor and evaluate the EZ/EC process.

Many communities long ago gave up on universities as places from which they could expect meaningful assistance. Some have worked out other ways to produce and disseminate the knowledge they need.

With training and support from the regionally based researchers and from staff at our center, these learning teams set priorities, develop local indicators, gather and analyze data, and share their findings locally and nationally. Our work with these teams has strengthened our belief that, in a program of this kind, participants themselves should be involved in articulating and defining research methodologies and in carrying out evaluations.

Another national undertaking, also supported by HUD's COPC grant, helped us identify 10 projects across the country where communities and researchers were already linking in participatory ways. Representatives of these projects were invited to a workshop at the Highlander Center in Tennessee—itself a historic center for strengthening empowerment and citizen participation—to develop a report on best practices of participatory research. The projects covered a broad spectrum of economic, ecological, and community-development topics, including the following:

• People affected by poisoned water in Eastern Kentucky have pioneered approaches to "housewife epidemiology" and community research on water pollution.

• A coalition of universities and community organizations in Ohio has come together to research ways of strengthening citizen access to the Internet.

• Journalists and Native organizations are working together in Wisconsin to research the impact of proposed mining activities on the environment in the Northern Great Lakes.

• A group of laid-off and still-employed factory workers in Tennessee mounted an "experiential research project" that involved traveling to Northern Mexico to investigate corporate investment, wages, and working conditions of Mexican workers in the maquiladora zone there.

• A "Listening Project" in rural North Carolina has taught scores of community groups the art of empathetic interviewing as a basis for community coalition-building.

• Groups in South Texas have documented patterns of human rights abuses affecting Latinos in border communities.

REBUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

These projects represent just a handful of the hundreds of participatory research projects that are springing up around the country and the globe. Among the groups attending the Highlander Center workshop, it was not assumed that building research partnerships with universities was an easy task. The groups pointed to difficult issues, such as how to keep the community involved and in the driver's seat; how funding shapes research priorities and power relationships; how to get information out to people in ways that are accessible; and how to put information technology, such as the Internet, into the hands of "information have-nots."

Each of the communities saw research as potentially posi-

tive, and all had stories of research findings playing an important role in gaining a voice, in strengthening democratic participation, and in enabling action on critical issues in their communities. But there were also many stories of the opposite experience—of university scholars who had done research in a community that had been disempowering, non-participatory, or misused. While there is interest in university-community partnerships, these partnerships will need to be forged slowly and carefully, starting with new relationships of reciprocity and mutual learning, and communities will need to see proof of the universities' staying power.

For those universities that wish to shift their research priorities in some of the ways reflected in the examples above, several cautions are in order. Universities wanting to partner with communities must appreciate that they are not reaching out to a research void. Most community groups have developed their own research and knowledge capacities, sometimes through the efforts of inventive and self-taught individuals, sometimes through informal networks, sometimes by building independent institutions. Many communities long ago gave up on universities as places from which they could expect meaningful assistance. Some have worked out other ways to produce and disseminate the knowledge they need. Others have become savvy and sophisticated negotiators, willing to work with academia, but only on clearly defined terms acceptable to them and their members.

The lessons of humility, care, and equity that we urge here are also ones that we face—and not always comfortably—in our own work. They are lessons, at least in part, that return us to the importance of social capital, the topic that informs much of this issue of *Change*. On a daily basis, we see how profoundly the culture of higher education lacks the social capital needed for the type of democratic research we are advocating here. On the other hand, we are accumulating evidence that universities can take positive and practical steps to ameliorate their impoverished state.

We have come to picture social capital less as a substance than as a network. We see social capital as consisting of connections between and among groups and individuals—connections built incrementally through shared histories of activity and interchange: more like a circulatory system than like the liquid flowing through it. No amount of "stuff" (whether the stuff be composed of good ideas, or dollars of grant money, or eager student volunteers, or studies providing answers to important questions) can do much good if there are no pipes or pathways through which it can move.

Universities contain vast networks of social capital. In these days of shrinking resources, substantial efforts are being expended to fortify networks that connect us to wealthy donors and private investors in the research enterprise. Precious few of these networks, however, are of much use to the kinds of efforts we are proposing here. And our traditional

RELATED PUBLICATIONS AND OTHER RESOURCES

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■ **Gaventa, John.** "The Powerful, the Powerless and the Experts: Knowledge Struggles in an Information Age," in Peter Park et al, eds., *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada,* Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1993.

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■ **Park, Peter, Mary Brydon-Miller, Budd Hall, and Ted Jackson, eds.** *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada,* Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1993.

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■ **Williams, Lee, ed.** Annotated Bibliography for Participatory and Collaborative Field Research Methods (1996). (Available from the Community Partnership Center, University of Tennessee.)

■ **Nyden, Philip, Anne Figert, Mark Shibley, and Darryl Burrows, eds.** *Building Community: Social Science in Action,* Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, forthcoming, February 1997. ∾

academic ones are not much better suited to the community re-search task: for the most part they begin and end at disci-plinary boundaries. Most often these networks are oriented upward, seeking exchange with those higher in the vertical pecking order of institutional prestige or professional associa-tions rather than reaching downward or outward to the geo-graphic communities in which we live or the communities of interest that relate to the subjects of our research.

In most of our institutions, a young, untenured professor does not have to be a heartless or craven careerist to find herself cut off from the very social problems and people that initially drew her to her discipline. She finds in her everyday academic life no existing conduits through which to receive information about or build relationships with those people and problems. She is functioning in an environment starved for social capital.

From the other direction, there are few grassroots groups outside the academy with much sense of where or how to con-nect with academic researchers, or how to tap into other as-sets. Heck, on our campus, "outsiders" don't even think they can find a parking place.

Nevertheless, we find from our own experience that the creation of institutional space for university-community col-laboration encourages change. For instance, we have learned a lot from our Advisory Council, a group whose membership consists of one-third from the university and two-thirds from the community. The council helps us in all the traditional ways that such groups do: providing advice, serving as a sounding board for ideas, making suggestions for future initiatives, ad-vocating for us with various constituencies.

But we also have learned that one of the most important func-tions of the council is its role as an incubator of social capital. In pairs and sub-groups, at the margins of our official discussions, across the lines of disciplines and the gaps between town and gown, the council members have made connections. The non-university participants have challenged our assumptions, de-manding that we examine difficult questions about the allocation of university resources and the identification of potentially con-flicting interests. On their side, university participants have con-veyed to community members "cross-cultural information" about the constraints and goals that often influence academic be-havior. People who didn't know each other before are beginning to call upon each other for help on matters outside the scope of our meetings. When one community group wanted to hold a fo-rum analyzing the local economy, group members independent-ly turned for help to a university economist whom they had come to know and trust through the work with our center. We are—to mix a metaphor—building a circulatory system that can reach even through ivy-covered walls.

Another example of the formation of social capital emerged from the mundane work of administering a federal grant. HUD's COPC program, because of its grant to our center, requires regu-lar reporting on our activities. In order to make sure that all the people working on this grant were properly involved in our re-porting process, we began holding meetings with all recipients.

We led off with scintillating agenda items such as explain-ing the details of the university's mileage-reporting forms and urging people to keep track of their time in appropriate incre-ments. What has happened, however, has moved us far beyond administrative detail. We have discovered that we have been creating social capital within the university. Faculty from so-cial work, child and family studies, economics, literacy stud-ies, history, law, planning, and sociology have been meeting together, learning about each other's areas of expertise, and catching glimpses of the different habits and customs in their respective disciplines.

RECONSTRUCTING THE UNIVERSITY

New models of research and new types of university-com-munity relationships have important implications for the lead-ers and administrators of today's colleges and universities.

Our sense about the state of democracy in America is far from sanguine.

Nevertheless, we have been heartened by our experiences in working to bring more

democratic research principles to our own practice and to our institution.

Several key institutional issues are likely to face college and university leaders who move to bring more democratic, participatory forms of research into the institutional mainstream.

The first question concerns funding. Budget constraints are real. In times of intense pressure on resources, it will take real vision and creativity to nurture new initiatives. Giving lip service to community-university partnerships while failing to devote significant resources to support them may hurt more than help the effort in the eyes of crucial community allies. On the other hand, universities face pressures to prove themselves more relevant, to link their resources to the solution of concrete social problems, to maintain public accountability. Programs that direct resources to these public needs—especially at public universities—may provide antidotes to some of the public criticisms (and consequent budget cuts) that often plague higher education today.

Another implication for campus leadership has to do with how these efforts fit institutional missions. University leaders must avoid lumping community-based and collaborative research endeavors into the category of "service." On most campuses, rightly or wrongly, service has long run a distant third place to research and teaching. We believe that democratizing research is beneficial to the community—that it delivers a real and palpable service—and we are aware of the sophisticated thinking about the meaning of "service" emerging from the service-learning movement around the country. We also know that the endeavors we describe here are crucially related to teaching. Our own best work has dissolved the distinction among the three spheres.

But none of these observations should obscure the fact that the participatory activities we have presented here are primarily about new forms of *research*, undertaken as an essential part of the university's core mission.

Faculty members across the country who are engaging in these new forms of research too often report facing a double bind: their democratic research work may be tolerated and even rewarded, but only if they simultaneously demonstrate excellence and productivity in the traditional ways. Yet working with communities in a democratic and collaborative way takes time and makes demands at least as great as those that traditional researchers face. Partnerships won't have the staying power they must have for community credibility and for the construction of sturdy social capital if they rest on stressed-out researchers who are effectively working two jobs.

University leaders interested in promoting democratic research will have to find ways to support and encourage faculty. Increasing first-rate participatory research will require altering the incentive and reward structure to encourage faculty to engage in interdisciplinary and cross-boundary endeavors. Leaders will need to help educate other faculty to the reality that publications and research products carried out in collaboration with communities are likely to look quite different from those

prepared for highly specialized, peer-reviewed journals.

Opening the research enterprise to broad-based participation involves other challenges as well. Participation with others involves moving over, making space, and in some instances sharing or giving up certain kinds of power. There are many examples of such university-community collaborations, such as grassroots representation on advisory groups for research centers, citizen participation on research teams, co-ownership of data by community research partners, citizen panels to suggest research initiatives and to review prospective grant proposals, and new "equity protocols" ensuring the fair allocation of resources earmarked for community research projects.

These forms of participation affect other institutional procedures, such as the protection of academic freedom, intellectual property rights, confidentiality, and protocols relating to human subjects. Questions about these matters involve recognizing that there are competing rights and values in a democracy—hard issues from which researchers and their institutions should not be immune. Rather than being ignored or routinized through deadening procedures, these challenges should be injected into debates about research in administrative halls, faculty offices, and classrooms.

A final point: leaders who want to promote research for democracy and democratic research must be prepared for conflict. Passionate disagreement about hard questions is a sign of a robust democracy. In a robust democracy, people argue over the allocation of power and resources. Research partnerships with the less powerful in communities may well lead to conflict, sometimes with the very corporations or government agencies upon which universities are increasingly dependent for funds and good will. Therefore, university leaders who want to nurture democratic research efforts must be ready to argue that it is their duty to take up the needs of all sectors of the society, not only those that can afford to pay.

Fortunately, this is not a new idea, so its advocates can call upon a tradition that hearkens back to the original missions of many public and private colleges and universities. Nor is it an isolated one, as this review of programs that are springing up around the country suggests. For ourselves, as faculty members, helping to build the Community Partnership Center has been rewarding to a degree far beyond our original expectations. Both of us have histories of community-based research and action, and we are regular critics of much university practice. Our sense about the state of democracy in America is far from sanguine. Nevertheless, we have been heartened by our experiences in working to bring more democratic research principles to our own practice and to our institution. Time and again, we have seen how excited faculty, administrators, and community members become when they are provided with the space and time to work together on real problems. We think that more of this will be good for American democracy—and for higher education. ▣