

1-2009

# A Case Study of Institutional Visioning, Public Good, and the Renewal of Democracy: The Theory and Practice of Public Good Work at the University of Denver

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## Recommended Citation

Fretz, E., Cutforth, N., Nicotera, N., & Summers Thompson, S. (2009). A Case Study of Institutional Visioning, Public Good, and the Renewal of Democracy: The Theory and Practice of Public Good Work at the University of Denver. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 13(1), 87-109.

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# ***A Case Study of Institutional Visioning, Public Good, and the Renewal of Democracy: The Theory and Practice of Public Good Work at the University of Denver***

Eric Fretz, Nick Cutforth, Nicole Nicotera,  
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## **Abstract**

In 2001, the University of Denver included language in its vision statement that committed the institution to becoming “a great private university dedicated to the public good.” This essay (1) explains how the development of an institutional visioning statement led to the implementation of a series of campus dialogues and action steps designed to forward public good work at the university; (2) presents campus conversations and current literature to offer a theory of public good work within private research universities; and (3) documents challenges and lessons learned through institutional efforts to embrace a culture of engagement.

## **Introduction and Background**

Conversations about the theory and practice of public good work at the University of Denver (DU) began in 2001 when a University Planning Council decided to establish public good as a part of the university’s vision statement. In the ensuing years, that visioning statement, “The University of Denver will be a great private university dedicated to the public good,” became a significant part of the culture at DU.

Subsequent to the implementation of the public good vision statement in 2001, a number of strategic campus conversations took place that were intended to help the university move toward the realization of its stated vision. In particular, the May 2003 annual Provost Conference was directed toward examining the question of what public good work looks like at DU and how the university could realize its public good vision. Topics discussed that day included diversifying DU, institutional outreach, public scholarship, teaching and learning, and volunteerism and activism.

In a final integrative session, participants identified five tasks necessary for the university to achieve its vision of becoming a great private university dedicated to the public good: (1) clarify the institutional vision; (2) reform budgeting and establish new funding sources; (3) create a mechanism to coordinate and sustain individual and unit-level initiatives; (4) expand tenure, promotion, and merit raise criteria to recognize public good work; and (5) develop an institutional culture of collaboration. These five tasks became guiding themes and goals for the integration of public good work at DU, and they serve as the organizing framework for the following sections of this essay.

One of the most important outcomes of the 2003 Public Good Conference was the development of the Public Good Scholarship Fund, a fund provided by the provost to support faculty and staff who are creating innovative community-based research. Since its inception in 2004, the fund has provided over \$500,000, in annual allocations of \$100,000, to faculty and staff engaged in public good work and research. These funds are awarded via a competitive process facilitated by the Public Good Fund Distribution Committee. As a result of this institutional commitment, DU staff and faculty have developed over fifty public good projects. These projects have helped a great many DU faculty and staff members develop a set of public skills to apply within their communities.<sup>1</sup>

The implementation of the Public Good Scholarship Fund has revealed a number of wider institutional contexts that factor into questions of funding sources and budgeting for public good work. Those institutional contexts include: place (urban vs. rural), campus and community demographics, public versus private funding, and the tension between higher education's role in the renewal of democracy and the increasing consumerist nature of colleges and universities.

In February 2007, DU hosted a conference that focused on the theory and practice of public good work within the institution, seeking to critically reflect on the history and outcomes of public good work since the inception of the vision statement in 2001. The conference brought together 150 faculty members, staff, and students as well as a handful of Denver community leaders and faculty from Front Range Colorado universities. Concurrent session titles included: "Defining the Public Good," "Promotion and Tenure and the Public Good," "Student Activism," "Junior Faculty Perspectives on the Public Good," and "Science and the Public Good." Conference participants' comments are used throughout

this essay to illustrate the current thinking about public good work at DU.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Clarify the Institutional Vision***

The public good vision statement was developed with relative ease. Defining and clarifying that vision has been a consistent challenge. When faculty and staff at DU refer to “the public good,” they are often talking about using University resources to augment civil society, strengthen social capital networks, and create public spaces for deliberation and community decision making. Participants in the 2007 Public Good Conference session titled “Defining Public Good” examined the connotations and denotations associated with the term *public* within the context of the University of Denver. “Doing good is relatively easy,” suggested one professor in the “Defining Public Good” session who went on to argue that it is the *public* aspect of the public good that is most challenging. For this faculty member, “public” involves “meeting the world on its terms, not ours.” In other words, it is about the intellectual and relational engagement with critical community issues and community members. In this way, public good work demands a kind of relationality with others (mostly others outside the academy) that is difficult to develop and is not valued or rewarded within institutional structures.

Six years after the development of the public good vision statement, DU has yet to develop a definition of the term “public good.” Conversations regarding the definition of public group work have occurred among campus affinity groups; however, these conversations have not led to a campuswide definition, perhaps out of fear of creating narrow constructs that limit the number of potential participants. One faculty presenter at the 2007 “Defining Public Good” session underscored this notion: “I don’t want public good defined for me . . . I want to do work that is for the benefit of people outside of myself. I don’t want there to be a definition that prevents me or anyone else [from making] mistakes while learning how each person defines it.” Still, the campus community generally agrees that public good is a broad spectrum of activities that include, but are not limited to, service-learning, community-based research, public scholarship, community building, policy development, advocacy, and volunteerism. Public good happens when the university applies its knowledge and intellectual resources for the purpose of augmenting student learning, faculty research, social capital, and improved communities. “Serving the public good,”

one faculty presenter asserted, “entails mobilizing our scholarship and our teaching in ways that [supply] all learning with an active dimension. . . . a public good focus means that we are teaching them [students] to learn about the world through engaging it.” “Engagement,” this faculty member went on to assert, is different from activism, which is generally reducible to do-goodism; by its nature, engagement involves “binding,” “commitment,” and “the condition of dealing with something or someone at length.”

Creating a definition of public good is not necessarily a prerequisite for accomplishing the university’s public good vision. Indeed, a narrow definition of the term is clearly counterintuitive to the nature of public good work at DU, which attempts to engage the academic interests and expertise of a broad range of faculty, staff, and students with salient community issues. Moreover, it could be

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*“There is a strong and realistic notion that the university benefits from its public good work . . . as much as . . . the communities it purports to serve.”*

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argued that loose or unstated conceptions of public good work have served the university well: the institution has clearly moved beyond the notion of public good as “doing good” or selflessly serving the poor and the socially marginalized. There is a strong and realistic notion that the university benefits from its public good work (from enhanced student learning, strong community connections, and faculty scholarship as well as a public

relations angle) as much as, if not more than, the communities it purports to serve. At the same time, it is probably important to work toward a broadly stated understanding of public good work within the university. Otherwise, the term will remain vague within the minds and the practices of the university community which, in turn, will result in a continued lack of coherency and understanding around how, exactly, the university is conceptualizing and practicing its public good vision.

Considering the definitive articles and nouns that oftentimes surround “public good” is a helpful way of conceptualizing the term. For instance, “*the* public good” could refer to democratic processes of negotiation, deliberation, and exchange that identify competing viewpoints around a critical issue and then work toward integration, or simply an understanding, of the multiple perspectives. This civic sphere perspective is what one faculty member had in mind at the 2007 conference session on defining public good when she asked the following set of questions: What are the

parameters of public good work at DU? Is there a tangible public/common good within our democracy? Is public good a contested space that is meted out through dialogue, engagement, research, teaching, and practice? If there is an agreed-upon notion of the public good, how do we move toward a more widespread application and understanding of the term—should we even attempt this sort of endeavor?

“Public” and “good” are each contested terms that radiate an assortment of contradictory meanings. Currently, the conversation around public good at DU is focused on the gestalt of the two terms “public” and “good.” Little attention has been paid to the significations of each term, so it is worth considering their broad definitions and understandings separately.

*Public* comes from the Latin term *publicus*, pertaining to the people. Since it first appeared in the English language, *public* has been primarily understood as the opposite of private, or relating to the whole of a nation or a people. Matthews (2005) defines *public* as “a citizenry actively engaged in the work that self-government requires” (71). For Matthews, the requirements of self-government are rooted in a classical tradition of liberalism that requires ordinary people to exercise power through rational decision-making processes. Matthews resists the common conception of the public as a fixed body of held assumptions, habits, and attitudes; instead he asks us to think of the public as a “dynamic entity more like electricity than a light bulb” (72). Following Matthews, other writers and thinkers interested in the public dimensions of higher education tend to define public as a fluid assortment of heterogeneous and often competing narratives, experiences, and worldviews (Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt 2005; Percy, Zimpher, and Brukardt 2006; Peters et al. 2005). Engagement with publics happens when these competing (or simply different) viewpoints come together to discuss, share ideas, solve problems, and create tangible products that make for better communities. This set of definitions can help universities move from the default mode of “serving publics” toward the creation of mutually beneficial relationships that strengthen public culture.

What do we mean when we say we are doing public *good* work? What are the signifieds and concepts that surround that word? In the Old English *good* meant “having the right or desirable quality” or “fit, adequate, belonging together.” William James connects concepts of truth and goodness and then subordinates truth to the good, arguing that “truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and coordinated with it.

*The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons*" (cited in Menand 1997, 30). Following James's pragmatist lead, Matthews (2005) suggests that good "is what citizens determine is most valuable in their common life" (72).

*Good*, then, when placed alongside *public*, creates an interesting, tension-filled phrase: if *public* refers to a heterogeneous mix of competing worldviews, and *good* refers to what is right, desirable, and harmonious, then *public good* becomes a search for harmony and understanding within contested and dissonant cultural spaces.

The important relationship between public good work and the civic sphere is illuminated through Jurgen Habermas's (1991) critical theory of public deliberation. For Habermas, a robust democracy is contingent upon the existence of a public sphere where citizens can participate in civic life and debate controversial public issues. Bohman (1996) defines public deliberation as a "cooperative activity" where individuals with competing opinions use the art of dialogue to resolve controversial problems (2). Bohman continues to explain that a nation is as democratic as its practice of deliberation; in other words, deliberation is a way to measure the value and effectiveness of a particular democratic order. Deliberative democracies involve ordinary citizens in the public discourse and decision making of local and federal issues—a process that uses the opinions and judgments of experts without simply defaulting to what Bohman calls "strategic rationality" (5).

In a place as pluralistic, diverse, and open as the United States, democratic deliberation can be seen as an effective way to mend a balkanized nation and to work toward the public good. A deliberative democracy strives for a shared vision that gets beyond individual and group interests, not by sacrificing them, but by incorporating competing visions and ideas into a consensual sphere. Public deliberation is not an effort to create a forced consensus and ignore cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious differences. Rather, deliberation is a tool to acknowledge difference and attempt to build dialogue and understanding through discussion, storytelling, and explanation. Through the development of what Fraser (1992) calls "subaltern counterpublics," marginalized groups (e.g., blacks, gays, students, fast food workers) can organize to develop strong, public voices that can become a part of the public sphere. Creating spaces for citizens to dialogue is one of the best ways to recognize differences and use them as a way to create a shared vision of how we want

our communities to operate and what we choose to value and support. Pluralism and diversity do not have to separate us and turn the nation into fragmented interests rooted in race, ethnicity, class, and gender. We may celebrate different holidays, speak different languages, and hold different political and religious beliefs but still work together to weave a strong democratic fabric. As John Dewey argued, democracy may be the only thing we have in common.

This Habermasian definition of public good work brings us to the contested understanding of what, exactly, constitutes *good* work in a DU context. Some faculty members hold a notion that the *good* of public good work references social justice concerns or the use of academic, disciplinary knowledge to identify and redress structural inequality. This conception of *good* is referenced by Longanecker (2005), who argues, "In a civilized society, one way we serve the public good is by caring about the least fortunate individuals; serving the public good means that we make sure our least fortunate individuals are served" (67). Others shy away from structural challenges of inequality and view the *good* through a communitarian lens when they use *good* as a vague referent to helping or serving the less fortunate or doing good works.

The breakdown in defining *good* often occurs around disciplinary boundaries at DU. For instance, the Daniels College of Business's Compass program, which promises to instill ethical values in business students, comes out of a communitarian/service-based set of objectives, while Graduate School of Social Work and College of Education faculty engaged in public good work tend to define *good* around social justice and equity issues and use classic community-organizing strategies as a way to enact those values. This raises an interesting tension that often emerges in public good conversations at DU: is this work political and activist by nature; that is, does it take sides around critical community issues, and does it seek to identify and transform oppressive social structures, or is it/should it be politically neutral and objective? Should the public good work of the university set its sights on the transformation of students and communities? Or is our public good work rooted in a charity model of community work that implicitly maintains the status quo? In other words, is building social capital with the Cherry Creek Neighborhood Association (a wealthy suburb of Denver) the same kind of public good work as working with community organizations in Five Points or Commerce City (economically challenged neighborhoods in the city of Denver)? Does it matter which "publics" we work with; that is, should the university's public good



work be directed toward economically disadvantaged publics, or is that less of a concern than a general (and perhaps unintentional) direction of our resources to a wide variety of publics?

### **Funding Sources and Budgeting**

The University of Denver, the oldest independent university in the Rocky Mountain region, is located eight miles south of downtown Denver. DU enrolls approximately 10,850 students in its undergraduate and graduate programs. The Carnegie Foundation classifies DU as a Doctoral/Research University with high research activity. While DU is an urban institution, its demographics do not reflect its host city. The domestic student body at DU is 82 percent Caucasian, 6 percent Hispanic, 3 percent African American, 5 percent Asian, and 1 percent Native American, with 3 percent unreported. The city and county of Denver, considerably more diverse than DU, includes 53 percent Caucasian, 32 percent Hispanic, 11 percent African American, 3 percent Asian, and 1 percent Native American residents. Although DU has made significant commitments to diversifying its campus, the racial and ethnic disparities between the city and the university have created some tension for the university, which is often labeled an isolated and elite enclave within the city. Moreover, for the past decade, the university has been looking to establish a national identity and, despite a number of significant City-based commitments and initiatives, it has not reached out to local communities in strategic ways. In many ways, the Public Good Scholarship projects have served as the university's primary outreach arm, although most of those projects are generated and driven by individual faculty members who infrequently connect their work with other Public Good awardees. Finally, since DU is a private institution that does not receive state funding, campus constituents are not required to work with publics in the same way as publicly funded higher education institutions.

Private higher education institutions in the United States enjoy a number of liberties that their public counterparts do not, but they may also endure various constraints. Reliance on tuition revenue rather than state allocations requires special attention to student recruitment and persistence. Such a consumer model is anathema in traditional higher education, but a reality for many small to mid-sized private institutions. Increasingly, higher education institutions are being asked to explicitly document, through outcomes assessment processes, the quality of education they are providing. These institutions also need to ensure that alumni are satisfied in the hope that they will donate. This is especially important for private

schools with meager endowments and local or regional, rather than national, reputations. A relatively small endowment can also limit a private institution's ability to recruit and retain high-achieving students and faculty, participate in innovative projects, and tolerate economic downturns or unexpected expenses. Private, heavily tuition-driven institutions with relatively small endowments find themselves trying to balance many competing priorities. Ideally, resource allocations are mission-driven, but if the mission is vague and not shared, defending those allocations can be a challenge. These limitations can contribute to an institution's difficulty in developing and communicating its identity and distinctiveness, as it may try to be everything to everyone in order to fund its operations. At the same time, perceived limitations may be leveraged into opportunities, given a vision and appropriate action.

Public good work at DU has generated significant tensions between the economic challenges of this private, urban university and the foundational mission of American universities to create and sustain a strong democracy. Indeed, this tension has become one of the fault lines of disagreement about the purpose and rationale for the university's engaging in public good work. Current literature on civic engagement and higher education reveals repeated calls for colleges and universities to realize their commitment to democracy. Peters and others (2005) argue that "[r]enewing the academy's civic mission by engaging campus and community holds promise of contributing to the larger task of renewing democracy" (4). Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt (2005) argues that higher education in the United States was designed to strengthen the associated life of the democracy.<sup>3</sup> The authors explain that the "social charter between higher education and the public includes such commitments as developing research to improve society, training leaders for public service, educating citizens to serve the democracy, increasing economic development, and critiquing public policy" (xiii). Over the course of the past hundred years, they argue, the original mission of the academy has eroded as the interests of private industry and the influence of a competitive market economy have gradually caused higher education institutions to shift their focus from producing knowledge and citizens who can contribute to a strong democracy to serving

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the needs of a consumer culture. This idea is echoed in a Kellogg Commission report (2000), which argues, “The irreducible idea is that we [American higher education] exist to advance the common good. As a new millennium dawns, the fundamental challenge with which we struggle is how to reshape our historic agreement with the American people so that it fits the times. . . .” (9).

Public good conversations at DU reveal these tension lines. One faculty member at the 2007 DU Public Good Conference echoed this thinking when he noted: “One of the paradoxes of post-Enlightenment discourse is that the trend toward characterizing the good in non-Platonic or nonreligious terms—that is, the self-interest and private goal-seeking—has contributed overwhelmingly to the erosion of a sense of the public as a whole.” Other faculty talked about a centrifugal cultural force at work that is pulling the university toward private and market-oriented ways of being and structures at the expense of an older tradition of universities standing for the production of knowledge that strengthened the associated and structural life of the democracy. The real dilemma for higher education, one faculty presenter noted, is the tension between the commercialization of the academy and its foundational principles of advancing the common good. Another faculty presenter noted that DU has let its culture quietly move toward “serving the private interests of our students as consumers” and supplying private industry with its labor needs without clearly thinking through its responsibility to educate students to become citizen servants of the world.

Failure to recognize the public mission of higher education and a silent default toward market forces stands to weaken democratic practices within the university and the wider culture. Legitimate authority, Barber (2006) argues, is of and for the people who do the work of the democracy, not the product of a market system that creates desire and masks it as need. Public is set against private in that the public decides, creates, negotiates, and deliberates *together* about the civic structures (schools, domestic policies, international affairs) that affect our everyday lives. On the other hand, private concerns are contingent upon the creation of private choices through market influence. “The market sets consumer against citizen, while pretending to empower the first to do the tasks of the second” (21). From Barber’s perspective, then, public good at the university should be about the work of citizenship. Although few faculty members at DU explicitly question the nature and the reasoning behind the university’s support of public good work,

there is clearly a disparity of viewpoints regarding the outcomes and intentions of the university's commitment to it.<sup>4</sup> As a powerful mediating institution within a democracy, the university has a responsibility to cultivate graduates who can skillfully participate in the associated life of a democracy and who have highly developed public lives. A more controversial issue, at least at DU, is the claim that the university has a responsibility to educate *citizens*, not consumers, and through a variety of means, this should and could become one of the ways that DU works out its public good mission. This is Ernesto Cortes's (2006) point, and it has been widely argued by a variety of democratic theorists and academics interested in the public dimension of American higher education (Boyer 1990; Kerr 2001; Boyte 2004). Cortes notes that human beings are not born with an innate capacity to participate in the public life of their communities. It is also worth noting that we are not born with innate capacities to consume the products of a market economy. Those, too, are skills we learn. Few would disagree that this culture spends substantially more thought and resources developing consumer habits of mind and practice than it does developing habits of meaningful citizenship. For Cortes and others, it becomes the role of the mediating institutions (schools and universities, places of worship, community and nongovernmental organizations) within the culture to help us develop these skills (47). Mediating institutions have played the role of countering the powerful signals of unbridled individualism, aggrandizement, and consumerism with a balanced view of the self in relation to others in order to move the democracy toward the ideal of *e pluribus unum*. Private concerns, institutions, and worldviews are clearly and almost decisively winning this battle, and a case could be made that one of the public good roles of the university is to stake its claim as a mediating institution and make a strong commitment to educating students to participate in the public life of the democracy.

### **Coordination and Sustainability Mechanisms**

Public good work at DU is coordinated through the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL). The CCESL is housed in Civic Engagement and Learning Communities, a unit within Academic Affairs. The CCESL's primary mission is to develop service-learning capacity on campus, although it holds no faculty lines and is generally considered a service unit by campus constituents. Since 2003, the CCESL has managed the Public Good Scholarship Fund. Management of the fund includes working with

faculty advisory committees to vision and write requests for proposals, solicit innovative proposals, distribute funds, and report on fund activity.

Initially, the fund was an experiment designed to stimulate faculty/community collaboration. For the first two years, the Public Good Committee struggled to spend down its \$100,000 annual allotment. Although faculty interest in the fund has increased since its inception, unlike other university-sponsored funds such as the Professional Research Opportunities Fund (\$200,000 annually, sponsoring traditional research activity) and the Center for Teaching and Learning Fund (over \$250,000 annually, sponsoring innovative pedagogical practices), the Public Good Scholarship Fund remains relatively obscure and of interest to a small percentage of the approximately 550 full-time appointed DU faculty members.

Like most universities, DU is full of competing priorities, so the sustainability of public good dollars and projects is a significant challenge. Chief academic officers argue that the university should not be in the business of self-funding scholarship, primarily because that sort of dynamic precludes faculty from competing in the market of ideas and grant competition and, ultimately, it is not the responsibility of the university to consistently fund faculty scholarship. As a result, sustaining public good work at DU is primarily the responsibility of the staff of the CCESL and the individual faculty members who have received awards, grown and developed their programs, and are subsequently looking for external funding to continue their work.

One way of examining sustainability issues is to look at who is currently conducting public good work at DU. Fifty-eight faculty and staff members have received 56 public good grants since 2004. Five of those faculty members received more than one public good award. The bulk of these awards have gone to faculty in social work and education, departments with a natural proclivity to this kind of work. Largely absent are participants from the sciences and engineering and the humanities. We address this topic later in this essay.

Sustainability is deeply connected to structural issues within the university as well. Faculty and staff who engage in public good work receive merit pay increases as a result of their efforts, but promotion and tenure guidelines (which are regulated by individual departments) do not adequately reflect the university's rhetorical stance on its commitment to public good work. And this is partly

why, in an interview for a related research project, the chancellor noted, “It takes courage to do this work.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, there is a great deal of debate and misunderstanding on campus regarding the role of public good work in the tenure and promotion process. High-ranking academic officers tend to conflate public scholarship (Peters *et al.* 2005) with the work of public intellectuals, such as Sean Wilentz, Edward Said, and Arthur Schlesinger (to name a few). The problem, though, as Peters and others suggest, is that public scholarship (i.e., academics engaging with communities and creating new knowledge together) is quite different from the kind of work produced by public intellectuals who are cited in *The New York Times*, and, for the most part, produce knowledge and scholarship in a traditional manner. DU faculty who are actively engaging in public good work tend to operate from the definition of public scholarship put forth by Peters and others, and express more concern about listening to communities and creating new and more localized knowledge through those relationships. The challenge for these faculty members is that their public scholarship is rarely recognized in the tenure review process.

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### **Tenure, Promotion, and Merit**

During the 2006/2007 academic year, the authors of this essay conducted focus group interviews with seventeen Public Good Scholarship Fund recipients in an effort to understand the impact of those scholarship dollars on teaching and research at DU (Fretz *et al.* 2007).<sup>6</sup> One of the many findings of that study was that DU faculty members who engage in public good work occupy a variety of professional identities. Most see themselves primarily as scholars within their academic discipline and public good scholars secondarily. Some of this group find themselves in disciplines where there is a natural permeability between discipline-based and public good work. This is especially the case with social work and education faculty. Others note considerable differentiation between the work of their discipline and public good work, yet they attempt to find ways to blend the two areas. The faculty members noted this disciplinary correspondence and tension. One of the study participants noted her disciplinary fit with public good work when she discussed how it allowed her and her students to put theory into

the real world: “[public good work] also allowed me to take all the theory I was talking about in class and apply it in a real context where potentially we would have the opportunity to have an impact on the lives of those students.” In contrast, another faculty member noted, “It is difficult being an environmental chemist, although it is a natural fit, it is difficult in my department given the structure of environmental research.” Still a third participant reflected an even larger chasm between his desire to do public good work within a discipline to which it does not easily translate: “You talked about professional rewards, and often we think about publications or something like that . . . and in certain fields maybe like education or sociology the work you do is really closely tied and you can publish something based on the research. But in my field it is a little more difficult. What do I write to a geography journal or a natural science journal about this?”

While routes for publication and other concerns were mentioned by all faculty participants in the 2006/2007 focus groups, there was heightened anxiety among those whose disciplines are not perceived to naturally align with public good work. Additionally, public good funding recipients who are not yet tenured, regardless of discipline, noted an appreciation for the doors opened by access to the funds and the community connections that result from being awarded the funds. In conjunction with this appreciation there was also a concern that public good work is not officially mentioned in the promotion and tenure standards of their departments or the university at large. This contrast between appreciation for the funding opportunities and the worry for future tenure and promotion was most evident in the junior faculty participants who named the simultaneous tension between traditional and public good scholarship and noted that they will continue to accomplish public good work despite the risks involved. These sentiments were echoed by a junior faculty presenter at the 2007 Public Good Conference who stated, “I would be living a lie if I was not an engaged scholar. I could wait until I achieve tenure, as some have advised me to do, but then I wouldn’t have gotten tenure by being true to myself. I would have become something I wanted by being something that I am not.”

A small minority of DU faculty who are tenured actually view public good and community engagement as the essence of their academic work, and they have created professional identities for themselves where public dimensions and concerns lead disciplinary identities and expectations. One senior faculty member

commented, “Our plan for the public good grant was really to support the work that I and several students had been doing for eight years on community-based research, and the public good grant was very timely because we had been supported by a foundation in New Jersey for six years, which started the work, but frankly that funding has dried-up with the [funder’s] change in emphasis, so when the grant opportunity came along it was an opportunity to keep the work going . . . and when I say the work, I mean the students doing community-based research projects in response to community partners’ needs.”

These anecdotal comments from faculty engaged in Public Good endeavors segue us to the tensions between traditional scholarship and the kind of public scholarship that is generated from public good projects. This was evident at the 2007 Public Good Conference when the memory and ideas of Ernest Boyer were invoked more than a few times. Any discussion of public good work and public scholarship at some point comes back to Boyer and his efforts to convince American higher education to redefine and expand its definitions of scholarship. In the 1990s, Boyer wrote a series of articles and books that called for the development of a “new American college” with a considerably broadened definition of scholarship in higher education. Without lowering rigorous academic standards, Boyer challenged higher education to create evaluation standards that recognized faculty for the production of new knowledge, interdisciplinary thinking, the application of academic work toward critical community issues, and exceptional teaching. While some academic institutions rose to Boyer’s call, most did not. Boyer (1990) suggests that colleges and universities rethink scholarship as a means to broaden their scope of academic publication to include the scholarship of discovery (research), the scholarship of integration (interdisciplinary studies), the scholarship of sharing knowledge, and the scholarship of application.

The fact that few universities have adopted Boyer’s model of scholarship is evidence that despite an institution’s commitment to public good work, there is a great deal of resistance to rethinking traditional scholarship to include it. Universities that adopt more open definitions of scholarship put themselves at risk of losing credibility within a structure of higher education that views traditional research as the apex of scholarly knowledge and progress. This structure that values the traditional type of knowledge production over a community engaged production of knowledge can temper a university’s full commitment to both supporting and



fully rewarding public good work. Therefore, commitment to community engaged activity and knowledge production requires risk taking for faculty as well as the university at large.

In the case of DU, the commitment to support this engaged work is evident in (1) the vision statement; (2) the budgetary support for the Public Good Scholarship Fund; and (3) support for the Public Good Conferences that occurred in 2003 and 2007. However, it is worth noting that until promotion and tenure guidelines specifically acknowledge public good work as a part of the faculty review process, public good scholarship at DU and other universities will remain on the margins of scholarly activity, at the cost of opportunities for innovative public good work and its community-oriented benefits.

This, of course, raises the question of what, exactly, is public good scholarship? Matthews (2005) places the question in the context of scholars listening to a variety of publics and developing research questions and problems from public relationships created through those interactions:

If one of the sovereign responsibilities of a democratic public is to judge what should be done, then what kind of knowledge is needed? Will the answer become evident if academics simply listen more attentively to what citizens say to them? . . . The knowledge the public needs can only be produced by the dynamic engagement of citizen with citizen. (74)

Holland (2005) defines public scholarship as an “integrated form of research and teaching that gives scholarly work a public purpose and gives faculty and students access to public sources of expertise” (250). Peters and others (2005) put a finer point on the definition, describing public scholarship as “more civically engaged and explicitly political forms of scholarship” (2) such as action research, community-based research, citizen science, contextualized science, and participatory inquiry and research. They suggest that “however it is named . . . the discussion about the academy’s civic mission is focused on the question of how academic professionals and students might more actively and effectively use their knowledge and expertise to address issues of broad public significance” (5).

Academic officers and some senior faculty at DU argue that tenure review is not contingent upon what *kind* of research is accomplished, only that it is accomplished (and, incidentally, published in discipline-based, peer-reviewed journals). On the other

hand, junior faculty members conducting public good research are faced with the harsh reality that discipline-based journals tend not to value the kind of public good research they are accomplishing and, at the same time, the peer-reviewed journals that are interested in publishing their work (e.g., the *Michigan Journal of Community and Service Learning*) are not deemed credible by their tenure review boards. In addition, there is a strong sense among senior faculty members (many of whom support public good work) that junior faculty should spend their pretenure years solely concentrating on their individual scholarship and then, upon receiving tenure, allow themselves to turn their research interests toward the public good. A 2007 Public Good Conference senior faculty presenter illustrated this point when she developed the following equation to illustrate what many consider to be the greatest challenge of accomplishing public good work: *public good = community engagement = the factor of time*. In this full professor's analysis, the "time factor" is especially acute for junior faculty members, and the cost-benefit analysis of public good work conducted by junior faculty means that another aspect of the faculty member's job (i.e., traditional research that counts toward tenure) is not being accomplished. This articulation gets to the heart of much of the debate around the value of public good scholarship at the University of Denver and other higher education institutions: generally, faculty are encouraged toward and (in some ways) financially rewarded for accomplishing public scholarship, but the institution has yet to make public scholarship safe for junior faculty members seeking tenure. The logic behind this kind of thinking goes like this: faculty members need to become experts in their field before they can share and create knowledge with communities. The expectation is that young scholars begin their careers in isolation from communities as they develop a body of knowledge that will allow them, in midcareer, to provide their knowledge to communities in need. Many junior faculty members, however, see this as a false assumption that relies on the technocratic, expert model of engagement espoused by their more senior colleagues; they argue that a scholarly mind and habits can, and probably should, be nurtured and developed through consistent engagement with publics.

The issues surrounding public scholarship are directly related to the changing nature of faculty work within higher education. The lead faculty presenter of the "Public Good and Promotion and Tenure" break-out session at the 2007 conference began his comments by invoking Rice (2006), who argues that the changing nature of our students and the complex social and cultural problems we

expect them to solve demand a structural reform of faculty work. Rice notes that an “additive or incremental approach to reform will no longer suffice; a more transformative way of thinking about faculty work is required.” Rice’s essay concludes with a passage predicting that future of faculty work in higher education and urging academic institutions to reform their structures in order to meet the challenges of the future:

The scholarship of engagement, which is only beginning to attract the attention it deserves, will require the greatest change in our thinking about what counts as scholarship. In the future, the walls of the academy will become increasingly permeable. Academics on the inside will be moving out into the larger world, and many on the outside will be moving in. There is serious concern about college and university faculty becoming disengaged, particularly at a time when knowledge creation is at the heart of economic development. Civic engagement and social responsibility can hardly be expected of the students of the future if faculty are not themselves engaged and responsible in their scholarly work.

These ideas are particularly on the minds of junior faculty members. A junior faculty panel at the 2007 Public Good Conference organized to discuss the challenges and rewards of conducting public good research and teaching articulated the professional risks and anxieties associated with the accomplishment of public good work at DU. A few social science junior faculty members expressed some relief that their public good scholarship is (partly) acknowledged within the promotion process of their respective departments. At the same time, they realize that all junior faculty who engage in public good work take risks when there are no clear promotion and tenure guidelines that support their community engaged work and scholarship. This tension was illustrated in a conference session when a senior faculty member of a social science department stated, “The institutional community engagement agenda falls on the shoulders of the tenured faculty who will carry the agenda and mentor junior faculty.” This perspective, which is shared by a number of senior faculty members, is clearly at odds with the notions of junior faculty who see public good work as an integral part of their professional life. In general, junior faculty members ask a set of similar questions about their public good

work: What will count toward tenure and promotion? How will this work be evaluated by peers? What are the risks of accomplishing this work? Can I balance the risks against the rewards in order to achieve my professional goals within the academy? To the advice from senior faculty who encourage junior members to put off public good work until they are posttenure, one junior faculty presenter at the 2007 conference posed the following counterquestion: “If we don’t do this work, who will?”

### ***Institutional Culture***

Philosophically, public good work is rooted in traditions of American Pragmatism, specifically the pragmatist ideas of the close relationship between practice and theory and the belief that truth is made rather than found through deliberative practices, rational decision making, and the negotiation of competing interests. In pragmatism, practice leads to and drives theory. Consequently, a pragmatist method is rooted in engagement with the world (as opposed to decontextualized knowledge and theorizing) as a way to test and apply knowledge. For John Dewey, engagement with the world preceded the ability to work effectively and skillfully in public life: “The only way to prepare for social life,” wrote Dewey, “is to engage in social life” (*cited in Menand 1997, xxiv*). Public good work in all its forms engages the campus community with the social life of the community and, if Dewey is correct, consequently helps prepare students to skillfully participate in the associated life of their communities and institutions.

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*“Public good work in all its forms engages the campus community with the social life of the community.”*

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A faculty presenter at the 2007 Public Good Conference illuminated Dewey’s ideas within a DU context:

Our faculty and staff provide numerous opportunities for students to learn by extending their knowledge from the classroom to the community—whether through an international service-learning experience in Nepal or a community-based research project in Northwest Denver. These real world experiences result in our students becoming not only educated people but also creative individuals who are open to experience, and possess a sense of responsibility for solving problems and taking

ownership of projects in the community. Furthermore, immersion in these real world experiences provides our students with crucial and valuable exposure to diversity. This integration of theoretical knowledge with practical, more informal learning empowers students to redefine their college plans and many pursue careers that tackle complex challenges of society and democracy through direct involvement and action.

Another component of American pragmatism, cultural pluralism (what is now described as multiculturalism), is an integral, yet oftentimes unnamed, feature of public good work. In short, the *public* aspect of public good work rests in our abilities to understand and work with difference. It is no coincidence, either, that some of the first American intellectuals to articulate theories and arguments for cultural pluralism were also trained pragmatists. Early twentieth-century writers such as Horace Kallen, Randolph Bourne, and Alain Locke were either trained by or saw themselves as disciples of William James and John Dewey, and their articulations of the role of cultural pluralism in a democracy fundamentally inform our current notions of public good work at DU. Since public good work is in many ways an attempt to find a common culture and a common set of shared beliefs in a heterogeneous democracy, early twentieth-century cultural pluralism is an important element of the theory and practice of public good work.

A faculty presenter in the “Defining Public Good” session connected the university’s public good mission to issues of cultural diversity and accessibility to higher education for students of color. For this faculty member, the public good mission of the university will never be fully realized until more scholarship dollars are directed toward students of color who, in turn, enhance the cultural diversity of the institution and, by extension, the public good work of the university:

Making our education more broadly available will assist us in our public good work as scholars and in working with students as well. We want students to learn how to integrate thinking about their community not in terms of people “other” to them, or not narrowly defined as for people just like them. Thinking together is most possible when the challenges in our broader community are familiar to those in our classrooms.

It is interesting to note that more recent definitions of the public good are easily traced back to pragmatist thinking within a cultural pluralism context. Quaye (2005) aligns public good work with strong democratic traditions and cultural pluralism when he argues that “[h]igher education is a public good when it connects its mission with the ideals of a democracy . . . and prepares students who have explored their own values and beliefs in and outside of the classroom as a means of developing their voices to fully take part in this democracy” (299). Quaye goes on to examine public good work as an important aspect of the university’s attempts to incorporate cultural diversity within its curricula, students, and faculty. For Quaye, the cultural and intellectual isolation he felt as a student of color prompted him to become a faculty member in order to support other students of color who are marginalized within higher education and, subsequently, fail to reach their full academic potential (296). In this way, public good work involves guiding students to understand and critique their received subject positions, a strategy intended to help them combat “multiple forms of oppression” they face within the culture.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to imagine where we would be without the University of Denver’s public good vision statement. Surely many of the initiatives and campus conversations that have developed over the past six years would not have happened. However, thanks primarily to the institutional commitment articulated in this statement, public good work has taken some hold at DU. Institutional support has enabled the creation of faculty development and funding programs that have increased our capacity to realize the vision that statement represents. Nevertheless, as this essay suggests, challenges remain in the areas of revising tenure and promotion guidelines to accommodate public scholarship and shifting the institutional culture to more deeply acknowledge the university’s commitment to the public good.

At DU we have come to understand public good work as an opportunity for higher education to play a role in the renewal of the associated life of the democracy. In turn, we think that the public good work of the university can renew the civic mission of the institution. Most Americans understand that public life in the United States is under siege. Few understand the power of higher education to play a role in its reinvigoration. The public good work of the American university holds the promise of strengthening the

associated life of the democracy. And if we do not take this role seriously within our institutions and within the larger culture, who will?

## Endnotes

1. A complete list of DU-funded public good projects is available at [http://www.du.edu/engage/faculty/faculty\\_pg\\_main.html](http://www.du.edu/engage/faculty/faculty_pg_main.html).
2. Transcripts are on file with Eric Fretz, University of Denver.
3. For lively counterarguments, see Stanley Fish's series of editorials published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *The New York Times*.
4. This situation is not unique to DU. See, for instance, Carol Geary Schneider, "It's Not Just the Economy . . ." *Liberal Education* 93, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 2–4.
5. Transcripts are on file with Eric Fretz, University of Denver.
6. Transcripts are on file with Eric Fretz, University of Denver.

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