

LA MESA POPULAR

Sharing Knowledge, Practicing Democracy

A Vision for the Twenty-First-Century University

Seth Moglen

Universities and Democracy

Although democracy is a foundational value in our society, we live at a moment of widespread pessimism about its effective, meaningful practice in the United States. As weak voter turnout indicates, faith in the electoral process is disturbingly low: only half of American adults vote in presidential elections, while about a third vote in midterm congressional races, and the numbers for state and local offices are even more dispiriting.¹ Even as ordinary people doubt their ability to influence Congress, state legislatures, or city councils in ways that will improve their lives, their opportunities for more direct forms of democracy are still more limited. Most Americans have little experience actively deliberating and participating in collective decision-making about issues that immediately affect them, where they live or work or learn.

A generation ago, the cultural critic and political thinker Raymond Williams described democracy as a “long revolution” in Western societies. He insisted that in the second half of the twentieth century, these societies were still at an early stage in learning the practices and procedures of democracy and he argued that one of our most urgent tasks was to invent and cultivate such practices. That task is more urgent today than ever, in the United States as elsewhere.²

Universities have an important role to play in this process, if they choose to embrace it. Universities have, of course, long been precious resources for democratic societies. They produce, preserve, and disseminate knowledge about our most pressing challenges. They have unmatched expertise in conducting substantive, sustained conversation about difficult problems in ways that are non-reductive, open to competing viewpoints, respectful of difference, and capable

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of drawing upon diverse sources of knowledge. By their very nature and in fulfillment of their central research and teaching mission, universities foster the essential practices on which democracy rests.

But universities constrain their democratic potential, and the most elite universities are, in some respects, the most constrained of all. Their democratic potential is limited, in particular, by processes of intellectual segregation. I mean by this that much of the valuable knowledge created in universities circulates only internally within the academic world itself and is not widely shared outside it—and also that at our current stage of democratic development, many important kinds of knowledge never find their way into universities at all.

Intellectual segregation has at least two principal causes today. The first has to do with the nature of advanced research itself. In most disciplines, researchers work in technical vocabularies and they have an increasing tendency to share their knowledge only with other specialists, often through dispersed international networks. There are good reasons for working in this way—and such practices are, indeed, necessary for some kinds and stages of research—but these dynamics also lead to intellectual ghettos. Second, elite research universities in the United States remain class-bound institutions; this means that they are also, given the nature of American society, racially unrepresentative. Students admitted to them come disproportionately from wealthy families: the poorer potential students are, the less likely they are to attend. This is especially true of the most expensive private universities but, distressingly, it is increasingly true also of public research institutions. The class dynamics evident in admissions practices are compounded by the tendency of elite research universities, especially private ones, to segregate themselves from the economically disadvantaged and racially diverse communities near which they are located. Taken together, these dynamics constrain the social circulation of knowledge produced in universities. They also reduce the richness of that knowledge by narrowing the range of social perspectives contributing to its production.

I propose that universities today should expand their democratic mission: they should become engines of democracy. In the era of sound-bite trivialization and talk-radio demagoguery, universities can disseminate the complex forms of knowledge necessary for democratic decision-making. They can, moreover, play a larger role in facilitating informed, open, non-reductive conversations about difficult problems. They can widen the public sphere, bringing people together to deliberate—not merely students and teachers, but also members of their wider communities. Universities have the stature and the resources, for example, to bring public officials together with the people who have elected them, to bring corporate decision-makers together with those whose communities will be transformed by their choices, and to create democratic spaces in which atomized and often deeply divided populations can enter into fuller dialogue. Universities might, in short, help us become more answerable to one another.³

But if universities want to promote democracy, in this broader sense, they will need to commit themselves to intellectual desegregation. In part, of course, this means that they must intensify their efforts to diversify their student bodies. But they should also enhance their relationships to the towns, cities, and regions of which they are a part. Universities should, as a matter of course, focus more of their intellectual resources than they currently do on the communities in which they are located and, in particular, on those portions of their communities most adversely affected by unjust social arrangements. Research faculty should be encouraged to consider how their expertise might be brought to bear on the problems facing the towns and cities in which they live. Universities should cultivate settings in which faculty, students, staff, and those outside the university come together to share knowledge about their communities, to address current problems, to take stock of their histories, and to deliberate about possible futures. Such settings can enable those within the university to share specialized forms of knowledge that are often unavailable to their neighbors—and they can also enable those within the university to gain access to local forms of knowledge of which they are often ignorant. By focusing on the shared problems of their own communities, in short, universities can foster the process of intellectual desegregation and can enhance their democratic role in our complex and troubled societies.

This article describes one effort to pursue this kind of democratic university–community collaboration. In 2007, Lehigh University launched the South Side Initiative (SSI), an enterprise that has sought to shift the relationship between a wealthy private research institution and the ethnically diverse, predominantly working-class South Side neighborhoods of the postindustrial city of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where the university is located. As the co-director of this initiative, I am not in a position to offer a neutral, objective assessment. I present instead a report from the field, an attempt to take stock of early efforts and challenges. The dream of the democratic university is not, of course, a new one. It has been revived by successive generations of university citizens for more than a century—and many related experiments are underway on other campuses.⁴ I offer these reflections, then, as a contribution to an ongoing conversation, an unfolding collaboration.

History Matters

Every university is located in a particular place, with its own distinctive history, its own configurations of power, its own patterns of privilege and disadvantage, its own experience of democracy and its inhibition. A university cannot function as an engine of democracy unless its members are conscious of the history of their community and the university's place in that history. What faculty and administrators do not know about the ways in which their institu-

tions have exercised power and pursued their own interests will come between them and their neighbors. In fact, it already has: those within the university are often the last to know. We found this out the hard way in Bethlehem, as I will explain below. But let me begin with an overview of the history of our city and of Lehigh's role within it. Our efforts can be properly understood only in this context.

Bethlehem was founded in 1741 as a utopian religious community by the Moravians, a pietist Protestant sect originating in central Europe. Bethlehem was, in several respects, one of the most egalitarian places in the eighteenth-century American colonies. The Moravians created a communal economy, in which everyone worked for the community and received on equal terms not only food, shelter, and clothing but also equal access to a free system of universal education, childcare, healthcare, and care for the elderly. Remarkably, no one in Bethlehem in the 1750s feared poverty or destitution in old age or illness. There was an exceptional level of gender symmetry in Moravian Bethlehem: freed from the burden of privatized childcare and domestic labor, women assumed leadership roles, both spiritual and social, in the community. It was a surprisingly integrated multiracial town in which Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans, speaking sixteen languages, lived, worked, worshipped, and learned together. Everyone in this eighteenth-century immigrant enclave—male and female, across all racial groups—was taught to read. In contrast to the usual story of failed utopias, this egalitarian community was economically successful and was, indeed, one of the most technologically advanced places in European North America. A population growing from seventeen to seven hundred people in the mid-eighteenth century sustained fifty different crafts and industries, many of them water-powered, and constructed one of the first systems of municipal running water in North America.

The egalitarianism of this community was, however, compromised and undermined in emblematically American ways from the outset. It was a slaveholding society: most of those literate Africans, living in conditions of relative material equality with their European co-religionists, were also held as chattel by the church. It was a town built on land that had been stolen from the native people, the Lenape, in an especially cynical manner by Englishmen who sold it, in turn, to the Moravians. And despite its prosperity and economic success, the communal economy was dismantled after one generation by church leaders in Germany. The ensuing privatization of social and economic life led swiftly to the collapse of both economic and gender equality.⁵

A hundred years later, in the late nineteenth century, Bethlehem became one of the iconic steel towns of the industrial United States. It was home to Bethlehem Steel, one of the world's largest steel companies and one of the wealthiest corporations in US history. Bethlehem Steel played an especially important role in the development of the structural components (most famously the wide-

flanged I-beam) that made possible the skyscrapers, suspension bridges, and battleships of the twentieth-century United States.

For a century, every aspect of life in the city revolved around the massive Bethlehem Steel plant (referred to by its neighbors, with a mixture of affection and awe, simply as “the Steel”). Most families in the city owed their livelihoods, directly or indirectly, to the Steel. It created extraordinary wealth for its owners and for its large managerial class: at mid-century, Bethlehem Steel executives were among the wealthiest Americans, and they built their mansions on the north side of the city. The Steel also created jobs for thousands of working-class immigrants from many nations, who poured into South Bethlehem to work in the plant. These immigrants built tight-knit, intergenerationally sustained ethnic neighborhoods. Many houses in South Bethlehem were built by groups of immigrants collectively with their neighbors—first one family’s, then another’s. Some people today are still living in the houses they were born in eighty or ninety years ago.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was intense economic exploitation in Bethlehem. Many steel workers were maimed or killed on the job. They worked long hours for low wages. If you ask elderly people in the city today, they will tell you without hesitation that their fathers earned ninety-six cents for a twelve-hour shift. There was, in response, a long history of labor organizing at the Steel, and of fierce anti-union violence. During periods of labor agitation, the steel company brought in state militia and private armies to break strikes and to intimidate workers and their families. The Steel was finally unionized in 1941, on the eve of the United States’ entrance into World War II, in the wake of an especially violent strike and the subsequent intervention of the Roosevelt administration. As a result of workers’ successful organization, there were, for fifty years, good, union jobs at the Steel, which brought higher wages, improved safety, paid vacations, good healthcare plans, and pensions. The union transformed Bethlehem into a model of postwar working-class prosperity. Steel workers began sending their kids to college in significant numbers.

Starting in the late 1970s, the US steel industry underwent an intensifying crisis, as a result of rising competition from foreign steel producers and from non-union, domestic “mini-mills.” This crisis resulted in the gradual scaling back and ultimate closure of the Bethlehem steel plant in 1995. In 2001, the entire Bethlehem Steel Corporation went bankrupt. It pursued a bankruptcy strategy that has become the norm for major American corporations: the company’s lawyers persuaded the courts to allow them to sell off assets to other companies, while shedding pension and healthcare obligations to retirees. As a result, thousands of former Bethlehem Steel employees lost the retirement and medical security for which they had given lifetimes of work.⁶

The closing of the Steel ultimately led to the loss of thousands of jobs, but Bethlehem did not endure the kind of sudden, catastrophic unemployment ex-

perienced in places like Flint or Detroit. Rather, layoffs took place gradually over a decade, while there was a shift to low-paid, non-union work. As a result, poverty grew once more in the city. Today, more than a quarter of residents and the great majority of children on the South Side live in poverty.⁷ A disproportionate number of these are the newest migrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, who are now replacing their predecessors from Hungary and Slovakia, Poland and Portugal. South Bethlehem suffers from many of the social problems that accompany poverty in the United States, including failing public schools and serious public-health problems. The former Bethlehem Steel site is the largest urban brownfield in the United States: its massive ruins and tainted soil cover hundreds of acres at the heart of the city.

Located in the middle of South Bethlehem, Lehigh University has had a complex and paradoxical historical relationship to the South Side. Founded in the 1860s, Lehigh developed in close collaboration with Bethlehem Steel. Its early strength was in engineering: it produced both the engineers and the technical knowledge that made Bethlehem Steel one of the most profitable steel producers in the world. While Lehigh played a significant role in creating massive profits for the Steel, the company also gave large sums of money (from its founding gift onward) to the university. Steel executives served on the Board of Trustees in a dominant role from the time of the university's founding until late in the twentieth century. The building of an elite, private research university also played a symbolic role for the Steel's managerial class, as a way of accumulating and displaying cultural capital—a story echoed in the founding of other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US research universities, including Stanford, Duke, and Carnegie Mellon.⁸

Even as the university was intimately tied to Bethlehem Steel, it largely closed its doors to the working people of South Bethlehem, who rarely had the financial or educational resources to gain admission. These dynamics led to a long history of town-gown class segregation. This kind of segregation is common to many US university towns and cities, though these dynamics had a special intimacy and geographical visibility in Bethlehem: a wealthy, private university serving a regional East Coast elite was located in the middle of an ethnically diverse, heavily immigrant, working-class community. The blast furnaces are visible from the university campus, and the university's spires are visible from workers' houses. Although Lehigh does not have locked gates to exclude outsiders, as many private urban universities in the United States do, the border between the university and the city has been policed with vigilance for generations. My elderly South Side neighbors tell stories about being questioned by the police if they set foot on the university grounds seventy years ago. My younger neighbors, especially African American and Latino men, are today routinely stopped by police if they walk at night on campus or even on adjacent public streets.

An important episode in university-community relations began in the

1960s, as Lehigh expanded its campus. Like many other private, urban universities around the country, Lehigh sought to solve its space constraints by working closely with city government to employ eminent domain powers in the interest of “urban renewal.”⁹ With the university’s active participation, the city declared portions of an adjacent working-class neighborhood “blighted” and forced residents to sell their homes, sometimes against their will. Lehigh purchased the land, razed the houses, and built a new section of its campus where its neighbors had been living. One of my neighbors had the misfortune of having two successive family homes seized through this process: one to make way for university expansion and the other for building a scenic road that takes students and their parents directly from the highway to campus, bypassing working-class neighborhoods that might unsettle the image of an elite university.¹⁰

Over the last two decades, Lehigh has taken steps to develop more positive relations with its urban neighbors. These efforts have mirrored those widely pursued at other institutions. They have been well intentioned and have produced some positive results, but they have also been haunted by the histories of segregation they have sought to address and weakened by inadequate attention to persistent, underlying power relations. A newly arrived president, for example, invested in decorative street lights to improve the look of the downtown area, but neighbors noted that the lights petered out within a few blocks of campus. When the university built new dormitories on the edge of campus (on the very blocks, in fact, seized through eminent domain proceedings some years earlier), the project included space for a modest plaza with restaurants. This was advertised as a “gateway” to campus that would encourage university–community interaction, but many neighbors, including some whose family homes had once been located on the site, perceived the architecture as constituting a new defensive wall between the university and the city. The university established regular appeals for charity. Most importantly, Lehigh opened a Community Service office that coordinates thousands of hours of student volunteer activity each year. The Community Service office has fostered much valuable work, including especially the sharing of knowledge by undergraduates with local school children in homework clubs and tutoring programs. Strikingly, however, the university’s positive gestures of assistance have consistently reinforced the hierarchical relations between campus and community. Like other wealthy universities—and, indeed, like most wealthy sectors of American society—Lehigh has tended to oscillate between viewing poor people as a potential danger to be policed or, in less threatening moods, as the beneficiaries of charity. Rarely has the university been able to recognize its neighbors as partners in education and democracy.

This was the state of affairs in 2004, when the city of Bethlehem arrived at a momentous turning point. After a decade of abandonment, the core of the Steel site—a hundred acres at the heart of the city—was purchased by a New York–based real-estate developer. Within days of the purchase, it was revealed that the

major stakeholder was, in fact, the Las Vegas Sands Corporation, one of the largest casino enterprises in the United States, which was filing for a license to open a casino. The state of Pennsylvania had just legalized casino gambling, ostensibly as a strategy for postindustrial urban and regional redevelopment. Presuming that their citizens were unwilling to raise taxes to pay for common needs, Pennsylvania's legislators, like those in dozens of states around the country, turned to skimming casino profits as a last resort for generating public revenue. The Las Vegas Sands Corporation secured the license and built a casino in the middle of the steel site, at the center of a toxic brownfield.

Back in 2005, though, before the casino had been built, people across the city recognized that Bethlehem was at a crossroads. The redevelopment of a hundred acres at the heart of the city appeared to be entirely in private hands (a casino corporation now replacing Bethlehem Steel), as were many decisions about the future of the city. Competing positive and negative scenarios circulated. City officials and Sands executives asserted that the casino would generate tax revenue, would create jobs, had the resources to develop the site, and would become an anchor for healthy urban redevelopment. Critics asserted that the casino would bring crime, as well as gambling addiction to the most desperate members of the community; that the city would be overrun by traffic; that the casino would create urban blight and facilitate the collapse of retail districts and neighborhoods, including those a few blocks from Lehigh's campus. Bethlehem residents had mixed responses: some were hopeful, others alarmed. But there was, at least in my experience, a widespread sense of powerlessness. People felt that they would have no role in making decisions about the future of the steel site (around which many of their lives had revolved for generations) or about the future of the city more generally.

South Side Initiative

It was in this context that we launched the South Side Initiative in the autumn of 2007. A group of Lehigh faculty—mostly in the humanities and social sciences, but some from the natural sciences, business, education, and engineering—began to meet with university staff and with community leaders and residents in order to understand what role the university might most productively play at this moment of extraordinary change in the city. In the course of the first year, we cast our net wide, meeting with politicians and public officials, with union and business leaders, with journalists, and with community groups of many kinds. These included immigrant aid and direct service providers, teachers and public health workers, local arts and historical organizations, church groups and environmental organizations, small-business owners and employees, economic development organizations, and senior citizen groups. Through these conversations, we sought to understand, first, what kinds of knowledge people

in Bethlehem needed in order to make sense of what was actually taking place in the city and what role a research university could play in helping them to produce, disseminate, and gain access to that knowledge. Second, we wanted to know how the university might help to create more space for active democratic deliberation and decision-making at this moment of transformation.

In response to what we learned, and through a process of trial and error, SSI developed a range of activities and programs. These were, in many respects, similar to the usual functions of a university. We brought in visiting speakers, held public events, organized classes, and set up working groups. All of these activities, though, focused on topics of pressing concern in the city, and each was organized to foster opportunities for faculty and students to come together with community members to exchange different forms of knowledge and to deliberate on local challenges. Visiting speakers, for example, were invited to give conventional academic talks in the specialized languages of their disciplines (where appropriate), but they were also asked to participate in public forums where they could share knowledge through dialogue with residents, public officials, and journalists. SSI courses focused Lehigh faculty expertise and student attention on important issues in the life of the city. Although some faculty already had substantial bases of local knowledge, others were bringing their expertise to bear for the first time on local issues. SSI classrooms thus provided spaces in which teachers and students alike often crossed for the first time the intellectual barriers segregating elite knowledge from local circumstance. We rapidly recognized the importance of having these courses team-taught by Lehigh faculty and community members; we call these “community partnership” courses. It was also crucial to open classes to community participation so that courses would not replicate the familiar dynamic that casts students and scholars as privileged observers and community members as objects of study. Similarly, our working groups have brought faculty and students together with community members to engage in sustained multiyear work on particular issues to which we could bring both academic expertise and local knowledge and investment.

Three illustrations will reveal how these activities work together in practice. During SSI’s first year, because of the urgency of the topic, we brought to Bethlehem leading experts on casinos. These speakers shared the results of their research on the actual effects of casino development in towns and communities across the United States. At one public forum attended by many community members, the leading historian of Atlantic City, Bryant Simon, explained in detail how and why the casinos that had been brought in to revive that city had actually destroyed the urban core. He described the specific dynamics of land speculation that led to the inflation of house prices and rents and then resulted, unexpectedly, in the laying waste of whole neighborhoods. He explained the economic processes by which restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and grocery stores were driven out of business. He explained, too, why Atlantic City’s mu-

nicipal government had less revenue to spend on social services in 2007 than it had before the arrival of casinos, despite the impressive-sounding “host fees” and taxes the casinos pay to the city.¹¹ Local public officials, including the Director of Planning for the city of Bethlehem, attended the forum, participating in the conversation, raising questions, and responding to concerns expressed by residents, business owners, and union members in the audience. Local journalists not only reported on the dialogue but also followed up on practical policy issues that emerged from the conversation, including real-estate speculation, the protection of local business, and local hiring practices at the casino.

This last issue offers an interesting demonstration of the democratic potential of university-supported intellectual desegregation. SSI visiting experts mentioned in passing that, despite federal Civil Rights protections, casinos around the country located in predominantly African American and Latino communities have, in practice, often ended up with mainly white (and often nonlocal) staff, especially in better-paid, public casino floor positions. This issue became salient in our conversations only when African American and Latino residents of Bethlehem, who had lived in Atlantic City and experienced discrimination in casino hiring there, emphasized the significance of the issue for our own city and for South Side residents in particular.

SSI brought the issue to the attention of a local economic development group, which agreed to organize a series of public information sessions about casino hiring with the active participation of casino representatives. We wanted these sessions to provide detailed information to demystify the security screening process, which has served as the main mechanism for reducing minority job applications—especially in communities with substantial immigrant populations and with disproportionately high incarceration rates resulting from the “war on drugs.” These sessions were conducted bilingually to accommodate Bethlehem’s large Spanish-speaking population and were attended by hundreds of South Side residents. This group also set up computer banks, staffed in part by Lehigh students, to enable residents without computer skills or access to complete the online-only applications for jobs, since these applications have functioned as another hurdle in many working-class communities. Through the sharing of scholarly expertise and local knowledge, the university was thus able to collaborate with a local nonprofit to maximize opportunities for local employment.

It was our aim for this circuit of knowledge sharing to be further extended by follow-up research on the actual percentage, and racial and ethnic distribution, of South Side residents hired by the casino. That research could be transparently shared with the casino, local officials, and journalists, and it could then, in turn, provide material for future SSI classes and published scholarship. Such practices of intellectual desegregation enhance the ability of faculty, students, residents, elected officials, journalists, and the developers themselves to attend to issues of social justice in the practical affairs of the city.

SSI and its community partners felt that equally important work could be focused on environmental questions, given the evident challenges and dangers of redeveloping the nation's largest urban brownfield. We invited the scientist and philosopher Kristin Schrader-Frechette to speak to a mixed university-community gathering about environmental contamination and environmental justice in a global frame.¹² During her visit, Schrader-Frechette noted that, in her view, the most pressing environmental danger raised by the Steel site redevelopment might well be posed by the two million additional automobiles that the Sands corporation estimated would bring customers to the casino each year, passing through densely populated working-class neighborhoods. Especially in a valley ringed by hills, Schrader-Frechette indicated, such traffic would dramatically increase levels of air pollution and lead to a spike in asthma.

This was a source of particular concern to us, since South Side residents and local health practitioners had already identified epidemic levels of asthma as a top public-health priority. Before the casino opening, 40 percent of children attending the South Side's elementary school had already been diagnosed with chronic asthma. Thus SSI formed a working group on traffic, air pollution, and asthma that is drawing on faculty expertise across the social and natural sciences. The group creates a coalition of faculty, students, South Side residents, community health practitioners, and public officials in order to monitor air pollution and asthma levels and to develop strategies for remediation. SSI community partnership classes have focused faculty, student, and community expertise on the environmental, political, regulatory, and economic issues surrounding this major urban development and public health challenge. A Lehigh graduate student was honored for her original research in this field. Meanwhile, local journalists reported on this story, and public officials have acknowledged the urgency of addressing the issue. In this domain, intellectual desegregation has enriched the university's central research and teaching mission and has fostered public awareness and political responsibility where it would not otherwise exist. Most importantly, it has begun to expand a democratic public sphere in which the university's South Side neighbors will be able to make stronger claims to the clean air to which we are all entitled.

The redevelopment of the Steel site is a matter not merely of economic opportunities and environmental challenges, but also of memory and identity. For thousands of people in Bethlehem, the Steel was the economic magnet that brought their immigrant families to the city; for good and ill, it was the center of work and of an entire way of life. People throughout the city have a keen desire for that history to be told and they want to participate in the interpretation of its evolving and contradictory meanings. They are afraid that it will vanish without a trace or that its meanings will be trivialized or fixed by others. From the outset, SSI was aware that the university had particularly valuable resources to share in this area. Lehigh also had an exceptional amount to learn from its

neighbors, not merely about the city of Bethlehem but about the United States, about the lived experience of global capitalism and the bewildering migrations it has unleashed, about the accomplishments and catastrophes of industrialization, about the evolving character of working-class communities, about patterns of racism and of ethnic competition and cooperation, about transformations in gender roles, sexuality, and family life, and so on.

Because people in the city were deeply concerned with these questions, we brought in experts to talk about strategies that other postindustrial communities had pursued when interpreting their histories. At one well-attended university–community gathering, for example, the anthropologist Cathy Stanton described the accomplishments and limitations of the celebrated museum in Lowell, Massachusetts, which commemorates that city’s now-vanished textile industry. On the basis of her research, Stanton emphasized a paradox. The Lowell museum, and other institutions devoted to industrial history, tend to attract professional-class visitors from outside the community who are seeking to make sense of the working-class lives of parents or grandparents. Yet such institutions commonly exclude current working-class residents of the city itself, many of whom are recent immigrant arrivals who do not identify with a vanished industry and who do not perceive such commemorations as engaged with the urgent present challenges of their lives.¹³ The implications of this argument for our own city were evident to all, and those implications have been actively discussed at SSI public history events ever since. Multigenerational steel-worker families and newly arrived immigrants discuss with Lehigh faculty and students and with local history and arts groups the forms of historical interpretation needed in Bethlehem, as well as the importance of creating vibrant institutions to enable South Siders to explore the lived experiences of the city today.

Public history, public humanities, and public art lie at the heart of SSI’s collaborative work. Through classes, Lehigh students and faculty join their neighbors in exploring the city’s past, in conducting interviews and making documentary films, in creating fiction, poetry, and visual art that explore the complex realities of Bethlehem. An expert in medieval literature asks students to consider how studying medieval representations of poverty may help them to understand and respond ethically to the contradictory experience of meeting at a local soup kitchen Lehigh University employees whose salaries are inadequate to meet basic needs.¹⁴ Other professors teach courses on social movements and practical democracy, asking students to collaborate with their neighbors in creating feasible, democratic strategies to improve life in the city. Through citywide public art projects, community members, students, faculty, and staff create maps of the city that we have inherited and of the city we would like to live in. Ambitious plans are being developed to create a center for interpreting the history of working-class life on the South Side and for enabling the widest possible processes of community self-expression. In these enterprises, we seek not

to supplant but to support the work of existing, and chronically underfunded, local arts and historical organizations. Through these practices of creative and cultural desegregation, we seek to expand the public sphere in the city, to enable people of all kinds to share knowledge, and to invent democratic practices to meet our common needs.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about SSI is the excitement with which it has been embraced by members of the university community and by people throughout the city. Distrust remains strong, but the desire to overcome a century and a half of university–community segregation is also powerful and participation has exceeded our expectations. In its first four years, SSI sponsored fifty classes focused on the city of Bethlehem across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Thousands of people, at Lehigh and across the city, participated in our activities.

There are, however, serious challenges to the work of intellectual desegregation. We face them in Bethlehem, as colleagues do all over the country (and, indeed, around the world) when trying to help universities realize their democratic potential. We face practical problems, of course, including the struggle for time and resources. If faculty and staff pursue this work as an overload, as activities added on top of their usual research, teaching, and service endeavors, the work will be poorly executed and will, in the long run, fail. Such failures will fulfill negative expectations and complacent assumptions about the necessity of separating research and teaching from the problems of our communities in order to meet appropriate standards of excellence in our disciplines.

If we want universities to function as engines of democracy, and if we want to pursue intellectual desegregation, these goals must be included in the strategic plans of our institutions and we need to pursue this work as a direct extension of our central research and teaching mission. Faculty will need time and resources, for example, to develop courses and to foster research agendas that bring their full scholarly expertise to bear on local problems. If significant numbers of faculty elect to pursue this kind of work, it will have an effect on the curriculum, and departments will need to embrace these curricular changes as enhancements to the sophistication and power of the education they provide. Scholars cannot successfully pursue intellectual desegregation in their spare time, as a hobby or under the guise of charity. This work must be embraced as a precious and challenging democratic practice among equals, to which scholars and teachers commit themselves as an integral aspect of their professional lives. In recent decades, the status of the “public intellectual” has grown considerably, but institutions have not yet committed themselves to creating the conditions that enable public intellectuals to flourish.

The problems of time and resources are, of course, even more formidable for many community members who wish to participate in this work. Especially in relatively poor communities in which large numbers of people are working

multiple jobs, it is exceptionally difficult for people to find time to participate in public forums, to attend lectures or classes, to collaborate on public art projects, or to participate in working groups, even if the questions at issue are important to them. The double shift, the speed-up of our work lives, the ever-lengthening work week (which affects people across the class spectrum): these are among the most powerful forces eroding the democratic public sphere in the United States today. If people must choose between going to work and voting, or between seeing their children and deliberating, then there is not, in the end, much choice at all. Under such circumstances, the democratic public sphere becomes a privileged domain accessible only to those with substantial incomes and contained work weeks.

If universities wish to cultivate the public sphere and to enhance opportunities for informed deliberation, they will need to think carefully and act creatively in order to maximize people's ability to participate. Obvious practices like providing childcare for public events ought, today, simply to be a matter of course. But universities will rapidly find themselves up against still deeper institutional obstacles—including, for example, policies that prevent their neighbors from attending classes without paying prohibitive fees, or from being paid for sharing their expertise as instructors in community-partnership courses. If universities, private and public alike, believe that fulfillment of their democratic mission requires that faculty and students share knowledge with those outside the university and have opportunities to learn from them, then universities must act vigorously to break the material constraints that continue to impede the free circulation of ideas.

Other challenges have to do with the conventions of academic knowledge production and with institutionalized structures of prestige and reward that discourage intellectual desegregation. As long as research on local problems remains a low-status activity—with concomitant effects on publication, tenure, and promotion—then most scholars will continue to avoid it. As long as scholars believe that only the use of specialized technical vocabularies will command respect, most will continue to employ them exclusively. If they remain convinced that addressing national and international conferences of experts will confer prestige, but speaking at town hall meetings will not, then we know where we will continue to find one another. I must emphasize in this context that I believe strongly in the value of specialized technical vocabularies and of international gatherings of narrowly focused experts; my own scholarly practice has drawn me persistently and beneficially to both. But if we know *only* how to speak in these vocabularies and are comfortable *only* in these settings, then our intellectual lives and our practices of citizenship have become badly truncated.

Some will say that in the era of globalization, focusing research and teaching energies on local problems is an invitation to provincialism. I disagree. Globalization does not happen elsewhere. The movement of global capital and its atten-

dant social, political, and cultural effects are as evident in our own communities as they are anywhere on earth. These processes remade Bethlehem in the era of eighteenth-century European empire and the transatlantic slave trade as surely as they did in the heyday of Bethlehem Steel, and as surely as they do today in the postmodern moment of the transnational casino economy.

Elite research universities must ask themselves why they are willing to invest large sums of money to send students on study-abroad programs in Latin America but will not encourage their students to meet their Latina and Latino neighbors down the street. They should also ask why so many of our institutions contain experts on clean-water technology, the history of feminism, and the rise of religious intolerance in the West who have never asked their students to consider how they might address tainted water supplies, sexual violence, or religious conflict in their own communities. We do, indeed, need to reduce US provincialism, and this will require more international literacy and contact. But intellectual cosmopolitanism does not require that we ignore the problems of our own communities. Global practices of solidarity cannot be cultivated by perpetuating segregation as the dominant habit of mind among educated elites or as a structuring principle of our universities and our cities.

Although many other obstacles stand in the way of the democratic university, I will end by returning to the problem of trust. We cannot foster the trust on which democratic deliberation rests if we are unwilling to attend to the histories of power, privilege, inequality, and discrimination that cast their shadow over university–community relations where we live and work. There is no comfortable way to learn this lesson. When we launched the South Side Initiative in Bethlehem in 2007, we began to receive our own education at our very first meeting with local residents and community leaders. We introduced ourselves and described briefly our democratic and collaborative aims, and then we asked those assembled to introduce themselves. After a few minutes, an elderly woman who has lived and worked her entire life on the South Side explained eloquently that before she was willing to enter into a new partnership, she wanted acknowledgement of the fact that the university had torn down the house in which she had been born and which her family had maintained lovingly for decades. After making her statement, she noted drily that she thought it was time to eat.

That was the end of the meeting, or so I thought. Our agenda seemed to be a shambles. For months afterward, we were irritated every time we thought of the gathering and of the frustration of our organizational efforts that day. But that was the day on which my co-director and I learned for the first time about the university's role in supplanting its neighbors through the use of the city's eminent domain powers. Only long afterwards—after many successful collaborations and after the making of an SSI-sponsored documentary about university expansion on the South Side—did I come to see the event in a different light, as a

transformative occasion. I came to see that my neighbor had, with considerable diplomacy and restraint, offered to teach us something we needed to learn. I also realized that she had not sabotaged the meeting or ended the conversation, as I had mistakenly imagined. Rather, she had generously proposed that we break bread. Despite a long and often painful history, and in the face of real losses, she was suggesting that we sit down to eat and begin to get to know one another. It was time to begin the conversation.

NOTES

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1. Between 1988 and 2008, the percentage of voting-age Americans casting ballots in presidential elections has ranged from a low of 49.1 percent (1996) to a high of 56.8 percent (2008), while turnout for midterm congressional elections has varied from 36.4 percent (1998) to 37.1 percent (2006). Data drawn from Congressional Research Service reports, Election Data Services Inc., and State Election Offices. Summarized at <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html>.

2. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1984). For an overview of Williams's thinking on these matters, see Seth Moglen, "Contributions to the Long Revolution: Raymond Williams and the Politics of the Postwar New Left," in *Raymond Williams: Politics, Education, Letters*, ed. W. John Morgan and Peter Preston (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 65–87.

3. For a related vision of the democratic university, which has influenced my own thinking, see Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 161–186.

4. Early twentieth-century visionaries of the democratic university include, of course, W. E. B. Du Bois and John Dewey. Successive waves of democratic movement building—in the Progressive Era, the 1910s, the 1930s, and again in the 1960s and 1970s—each produced new visions of the socially engaged modern university. In recent years, "civic engagement" has emerged as a widespread goal of US colleges and universities. Yet the actual meaning of this goal varies a great deal in practice, encompassing everything from traditional models of charity and student volunteerism that support established social hierarchies to ambitious experiments in democratic institution building. The scale of this development can be registered, in part, by the extensive membership of colleges and universities in large national networks such as Campus Compact and Imagining America.

5. This account of Moravian Bethlehem, and the succeeding account of the city's later history, is based on research for my book in progress, *Bethlehem: American Utopia, American Tragedy*. For useful overviews of Moravian Bethlehem, see Beverly Prior Smaby, *The Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem: From Communal Mission to Family Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), and Katherine Carté Engel, *Religion and Profit: Moravians in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

6. For a lively, journalistic overview of Bethlehem Steel's relation to the city, see John Strohmeyer, *Crisis in Bethlehem: Big Steel's Struggle to Survive* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986). On the Bethlehem Steel corporation's bankruptcy, see Mark Reutter, *Making*

Steel: Sparrows Point and the Rise and Ruin of American Industrial Might (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 443–462.

7. According to the 2000 census, 25.7 percent of South Side residents were living below the official poverty line. See *Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: General Population and Housing Characteristics from the 2000 US Census* (City of Bethlehem, PA: Bureau of Planning and Zoning, 2000),

10. In conversation with me, Principal Ed Docalovich reported that 91 percent of students at the South Side's public junior high school, Broughal Middle School, qualified in 2011 for free or reduced-cost lunch.

8. For official accounts of the university's history, written by the daughter of a former Lehigh president and by a history department faculty member respectively, see Catherine Drinker Bowen, *A History of Lehigh University* (South Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh Alumni Bulletin, 1924) and W. Ross Yates, *Lehigh University: A History of Education in Engineering, Business, and the Human Condition* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1992).

9. The University of Chicago is a parallel case, for example, as Danielle Allen has shown; see note 10.

10. On the city's use of eminent domain powers to seize blocks of houses north of Packer Avenue, and on the university's role in this process, see the SSI-sponsored documentary film by Jeff Remling, "Urban Renewal in the South Side," at http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/cdm4/beyond_viewer.php?DMTHUMB=1&DMTEXT=documentary&searchworks=searchdocumentary_0&ptr=015831. For a discussion of the University of Chicago case, see Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 176–180.

11. See Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

12. For her views on these issues, see Kristin Shrader-Frechette, *Taking Action, Saving Lives: Our Duties to Protect Environmental and Public Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

13. See Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

14. For this professor's reflections on the pedagogical method of the course, see Kate Crassons, "Poverty, Representation, and the Expanded English Classroom," *English Language Notes* 47, no. 2 (2009): 95–104. For a demonstration of the power of this kind of socially engaged teaching to transform a scholar's understanding of her own area of research expertise (in this case, medieval allegory), see Kate Crassons, "Going Forth in the World: Piers Plowman and Service Learning," in *Approaches to Teaching Langland's Piers Plowman* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2011).