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Democracy's Education: Public Work, Citizenship, and the Future of Colleges and Universities

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Today Americans feel powerless in the face of problems on every front. Such feelings are acute in higher education, where educators are experiencing an avalanche of changes: cost cutting, new technologies, and demands that higher education be narrowly geared to the needs of today's workplace. College graduates face mounting debt and uncertain job prospects, and worry about a coarsening of the mass culture and the erosion of authentic human relationships. Higher education is increasingly seen, and often portrays itself, as a ticket to individual success--a private good, not a public one.

Democracy's Education grows from the American Commonwealth Partnership, a year-long project to revitalize the democratic narrative of higher education that began with an invitation to Harry Boyte from the White House to put together a coalition aimed at strengthening higher education as a public good. The project was launched at the beginning of 2012 to mark the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, which created land grant colleges.

Beginning with an essay by Harry C. Boyte, "Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work," which challenges educators and their partners to claim their power to shape the story of higher education and the civic careers of students, the collection brings world-famous scholars, senior government officials, and university presidents together with faculty, students, staff, community organizers, and intellectuals from across the United States and South Africa and Japan. Contributors describe many constructive responses to change already taking place in different kinds of institutions, and present cutting-edge ideas like "civic science," "civic studies," "citizen professionalism," and "citizen alumni." Authors detail practical approaches to making change, from new faculty and student roles to changes in curriculum and student life and strategies for everyday citizen empowerment. Overall, the work develops a democratic story of education urgently needed to address today's challenges, from climate change to growing inequality.

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