The vigorous conversation about higher education reform has drawn the interest of a wide public, arguably piqued by French economist Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), which proposed increasing public spending in higher education to address growing economic inequities. Similarly, Henry Giroux’s *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (2014) asserted that neoliberal practices and policies have short-changed current college and university students—in an orientation toward market rationality and competitiveness; Lani Guinier’s *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy* (2015) exhorted higher education leadership to redress a corrupt merit system; and Kevin Carey’s *The End of College* (2015) reasoned that increasing access to online learning may curtail education’s exponential costs in the future. These authors, and many others, have sought to redress the crisis in higher education—budget cuts, untenable student debt, and profit-making colleges—through analysis that often, unfortunately, appeals to powerlessness over agency. While Harry C. Boyte travels among these public intellectuals, his *Democracy’s Education: Public Work, Citizenship, & The Future of Colleges and Universities* issues a strategic call to overcome the crisis in higher education through reform that focuses on greater institutional and individual practices of citizenship and public work, which he defines as “work that explicitly and intentionally prepares our students (and ourselves) to be builders of the democracy, not simply helpers, voters, analysts, informers, or critics” (p. 1). As a faculty member at the University of Minnesota and at Augsburg College, Boyte researches, writes about, and convenes gatherings about citizenship, the topic of eight of his previous books. He introduces and concludes this current collection of essays with arguably his most powerful and trenchant treatise on and call for civic action.

In 2012, the White House Office of Public Engagement tapped Boyte to convene a symposium in order to advance the agenda of incorporating citizenship training within higher education. The twenty-four brief essays in *Democracy’s Education* are the product of that gathering and offer analysis and suggest interventions. Boyte organized the essays into eight parts, by theme and by stakeholder (such as policy makers, university presidents, faculty, students, alumni, and community organizers). In his introduction, Boyte urges the university community to move beyond “narrow views of citizenship as voting and voluntarism,” and instead to “reinvent citizenship as public work, work that explicitly and intentionally prepares our
students (and ourselves) to be builders of the democracy” (p. 1). Higher education, Boyte argues, can move beyond its perceived powerlessness and can become a renewed space of civic action.

The essayists in Part I address the ability of colleges to guide and inspire others to make public commitments. David Matthews, President of the Kettering Foundation and a frequent contributor to this national dialogue, argues that we must narrow the divide between academic traditionalists and engaged scholars and encourage faculty to cultivate roles in the community beyond providing expertise. A faculty member, he says, could become a “coach” or “guide-on-the-side” that “fosters the public or collective learning that produces practical wisdom” (p. 41). Sociologist Scott Peters finds inspiration and an academic home at Cornell University, sometimes referred to as “democracy’s college.” Cornell is one of the country’s more than 100 land-grant institutions, which were established by the Morrill Act in 1862 and 1890 with the mission of engaging greater equity in education, including democratic narratives and a “living tradition” that can inspire other institutions of higher learning to better incorporate and value civic action (p. 47; original emphasis). Both of these essayists see the potential for using existing resources more effectively to advance a civic mission.

The college presidents who contributed essays in Part II speak as “public philosophers,” articulating the critical nature of public work at individual campuses as they shape national education policy (p. 63). Former Syracuse President Nancy Cantor has seeded her agenda at multiple colleges, arguing that higher education must foster an ecosystem of scholar-educator-citizens who accomplish work “in public, with publics, for public purposes.” Under her presidency, Syracuse sponsored downtown economic development and has invested in public art installation. Cantor concedes that the optimal balance of the ecosystem she proposes is always in flux and, in order to attract sustained faculty participation, it must include rewards and the removal of obstacles. In order to maintain the health of the ecosystem, she says, academics must also learn how to shift from lecturers to listeners in their work as community partners. Essay contributor Robert Bruininks, former President of the University of Minnesota, concurs, and emphasizes a strategy of lasting partnerships with nearby neighborhoods, especially in light of its historic tradition as a land grant institution. Finally, citing narrowing interpretations of citizenship, essayist and Denison University President Adam Weinberg encourages his campus to “get off the sidelines,” and to train students to be civic-minded not only in their service-learning classes and student volunteer groups, but also in their everyday lives, such as negotiating conflict with their roommates (p. 99). Such confrontations, instead of annoyances or problems resolved by paid professionals, can become an opportunity to practice “the habits and skills of civil discourse” (p. 101). The specificity of the recommendations in each of these essays demonstrates the capacity for a college president to not only sanction and encourage public work, but also to participate in its strategic planning.

The essayists in Parts III, IV, and V offer a playbook of principles and strategy for future stakeholders. Written by faculty, Part III encourages both academic traditionalists and engaged scholars to incorporate public work in their classrooms. In recommending such things as first-year
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seminars and service-learning initiatives, the essayists in this section identify specific ways for adjuncts, tenured, and emeriti faculty to participate. Educational sociologist Timothy K. Eatman writes about how faculty can make small adjustments in their lectures to help students see W. E. B. DuBois, George Washington Carver, and Ella Baker—for example—not only as historical figures but also as engaged scholars. Part IV focuses on the public work of students and alumni. Cecilia M. Orphan argues that doctoral students—the professors of tomorrow—are often not included in campus civic programs, a basic redress that will ensure future stakeholders within the academy. Julie Ellison, an academic traditionalist, recalls her own metamorphosis from British literature scholar to founder of Citizen Alum, a national organization that engages alumnae through civic involvement. The essays in Part V argue, in part, that a student’s education can be extended through powerful partnerships with non-profit and government leaders.

Part VI focuses on the future of citizenship education in university life and includes essays by political theorist Benjamin Barber; Tufts University Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship Peter Levine, whose national prominence lend credibility to the book’s civic call; and contributors from Japan and South Africa. Essayist Lisa Clark concludes that, “With the right support, the problems we face as educators can be turned into opportunities that strengthen our individual and collective capacities as teacher citizens” (p. 240). Clark intertwines the practical and the philosophical, in order to imagine the future of teaching alongside an imperative for public work.

In Democracy’s Education, Boyte reflects the same collaborative thought process he desires of all stakeholders in higher education. Where the reader’s interest may possibly stall are in moments when collaborative thinking yields to doomsday claims that obscure supportive evidence, e.g. Boyte’s claims that the “spread of technology” has overrun the focus on public work (p. 260). What prevails, however, is a powerful example of a scholar who is not only steeped in the theoretical underpinnings of citizenship, but who also knows how to convene a “common table” of thinkers and doers, with a chair set aside for the next reader ready to make a difference on his or her own campus and in his or her community (p. 264).

Boyte writes most powerfully from his own wheelhouse of democracy and citizenship. As a former field secretary for Martin Luther King, Jr., Boyte grounds Democracy’s Education in his lifelong belief in the power of social change. In the introduction, he hearkens back to Sweet Honey in the Rock’s lyric, “We are the ones we have been waiting for” (p. 2). He reflects upon and practices the organizing principle of the “common table,” a metaphor founded in the Civil Rights Movement (264). This call to a new or renewed leadership in higher education encourages us to believe that, in this twenty-first century moment of powerlessness, each one of us has the potential to become a stakeholder in the future of higher education.

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1 This adage is attributed to poet June Jordan. It is also the title of 2013 book by Tufts professor Peter Levine, with the same title.