

Introduction

*University-Assisted Community Schools and
the Expanding Global Movement of Democratic, Civically
Engaged, Modern Research Universities*

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

—KARL MARX, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845–1846)

The university, I maintain, is the prophetic interpreter of democracy; the prophet of her past, in all its vicissitudes; the prophet of her present in all its complexity; the prophet of her future, in all its possibilities.

—WILLIAM RAINEY HARPER,
“The University and Democracy” (1899)

Karl Marx was wrong; John Dewey was right. In modern societies, the economic system is not the strategic societal subsystem; the schooling system is. Karl Marx was wrong; William Rainey Harper was right. In modern societies, the factory is not the strategic organization; the research university is.

To develop and support those propositions, we have written this book, whose title summarizes our basic argument: *Knowledge for Social Change: Bacon, Dewey, and the Revolutionary Transformation of Research Universities in the Twenty-First Century*. We argue for radically transforming research universities to function as democratic, civic, and community-engaged institutions dedicated to advancing learning and knowledge for social change and “the relief of man’s estate”—an iconic phrase by which Francis Bacon, writing in the early seventeenth century, meant the continuous betterment of the human condition. To support that argument, we focus on some of the significant contributions to learning made by Bacon, Benjamin Franklin, Seth Low, Jane Addams, William Rainey Harper, and John Dewey, as well as past and current efforts, including our own, to create and sustain democratically engaged colleges and universities for the public good.

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We also discuss *university-assisted community schools*, our approach for effecting a radical transformation of research universities and contributing to more democratic schools, communities, and societies. Our own experiences and the work of a number of significant thinkers helped us develop the idea of the university-assisted community school, which is one of this book's two major themes. Most directly, the idea was shaped by Dewey and Harper. To introduce the concept of university-assisted community schools and sketch out our plan for this book, we turn to two concrete examples of their contributions to the advancement of learning.

Until his appointment to the University of Chicago in 1894, Dewey had only a minor interest in how schooling systems functioned and how they might be improved. For complex reasons, the Chicago appointment radically changed his interests. During his ten years in Chicago, Dewey became convinced that revolutionizing the schooling system was the best means to transform America into the participatory democratic, "organic" society he had envisioned as early as 1888 in a lengthy essay entitled "The Ethics of Democracy."¹

In Chicago, Dewey came to believe that a major component of that schooling revolution would be the transformation of American public schools into *community schools*—that is, schools that would function as the social centers of the communities in which they were located. Although he did not invent the concept of community schools, he extended the work of other scholars and added his own distinctive interpretation. He envisioned neighborly organizations that would help educate democratic citizens by bringing together people of diverse backgrounds for continuous lifelong education and social interaction in collaborative ways that would surmount the barriers of race, class, and religion. He came to the community school idea largely as a result of his close association and friendship with Jane Addams and her colleagues at Hull House, the famous social settlement Addams and Ellen Gates Starr had founded on Chicago's poverty-stricken West Side. The practical activities of the women of Hull House, and the powerful theories and insights these passionate activists derived from their work, helped Dewey to understand the central role that local communities played in American society and also to see that public schools could function as strategic agencies to help develop participatory democratic communities.

In 1902, inspired by Hull House and settlement houses in other cities, Dewey presented a highly significant, prescient address, "The School as Social Centre," at a National Education Association conference. Viewed in historical perspective, the talk clearly anticipated some of the community school movements that episodically rose and fell in the United States after 1902, and are now strongly rising again. The current community school movement, in particular, builds on and extends Dewey's idea that since public schools "belong"

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to all members of the community, they should “serve” all members of the community—and are particularly well-suited to function as neighborhood “hubs” or “centers,” around which local partnerships can be generated and developed. When they play that innovative role, schools function as community institutions par excellence, providing a decentralized, democratic, community-based response to rapidly changing community problems. In the process, they help young people learn and develop skills through action-oriented, collaborative, real-world problem solving.

Dewey’s 1902 address and the various community school movements that it inspired would, in complex ways, eventually lead to the development of the theory and practice of university-assisted community schools in the twenty-first century. The university-assisted community school logically extends and updates Dewey’s theory of the school as a social center. In our neo-Deweyan conception, the neighborhood school becomes the core institution that provides comprehensive services, galvanizes other community institutions and groups, and helps solve the myriad problems that communities confront in a rapidly changing world. Dewey rightly recognized that if the neighborhood school is to function as a genuine community center, it requires additional human resources and support. In this vein we emphasize “university-assisted” because community schools do indeed require far more resources than traditional schools and because we are convinced that, in relative terms, universities constitute the strategic and most powerful sources of broadly based, comprehensive, sustained support for community schools.

Our second major theme is the advancement of learning by means of *modern research universities*. William Rainey Harper played a leading role in the evolution and eventual development of the modern research university. In 1890 he became the first president of the University of Chicago, which formally began operations in October 1892. Thanks to Harper’s “messianic” vision of the role research universities could play in modern societies, as well as the huge amounts of money he persuaded John D. Rockefeller to give him to realize it, his new university was quickly successful. A detailed historical account of the “Chicago pragmatists” described its astonishing rise: “By the time the university celebrated its decennial year, it had won widespread (if sometimes grudging) recognition as one of the leading research institutions in the world, and within its walls were being developed theories whose impact was felt in both academic and the outside worlds.”²

It helps to explain Harper’s grand vision of the role of research universities in modern societies that at an early age he became a leading biblical scholar in the United States. He not only passionately studied the Old Testament; his “fundamental vision” for the University of Chicago was inspired by it. In his messianic vision, the university was the “prophet of democracy”—the strategic organizational innovation that would help realize and fulfill the promise

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of American democracy. The complex environments of urban universities would enable them to make especially significant advances in knowledge and learning, Harper contended; these advances would come through the practice of *cosmopolitan localism*—our term for his innovative concept.³ His own university would fulfill its prophetic role by striving to ameliorate the severe problems confronting its dynamically growing city, in particular the problems of its public schools.

Harper's theory of democracy in industrial societies, which was to powerfully influence Dewey, identified the schooling system as the leading societal subsystem, whose continuing development and *effective integration* at all levels (elementary to university) is mandatory to produce significant democratic progress. Assigning to universities the role of "Messiah," the "to-be-expected deliverer" of democracy, Harper theorized that their major responsibility was to ensure the quality of their country's schooling system. If that system did not powerfully accelerate "democratic progress," then its universities must be performing poorly—no matter what else they did successfully. "By their [democratic] fruits shall ye know them" was the pragmatic, Baconian, real-world performance test Harper prescribed for American and European universities.⁴

With his messianic philosophy, activist temperament, extraordinary organizational skills, and experience, Harper applied his societal theory and Chicago's strategic location in the midwestern communication system and economy to make his university the active hub of an integrated network of midwestern schools, academies, and colleges dedicated to fulfilling democracy's "mission to the world."⁵

Having sketched the critical roles played by John Dewey in the development of university-assisted community schools and William Rainey Harper in the evolution and development of the modern research university, we now turn to a historically and empirically grounded analysis of those two radical contributions to the advancement of learning. Our historical analysis begins with the revolutionary work of Francis Bacon at the turn of the seventeenth century.