Land Grants and the Future of Democracy:

Overcoming the knowledge wars through civic science

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Many thanks to Provost Feser for this invitation. I am honored to be celebrating Founders' Day with you on Oregon State University's Sesquicentennial. I also want to thank President Ray and Vice Provost Reed, whose work in promoting connections with communities I have known about and appreciated for some time. Scott led me to Bill Robbins forthcoming book, "People's College: A History of Oregon State University." I want to lift up the book. My message today is that Oregon State University can take leadership not only in turning around public hostility toward higher education but in helping to revitalize democracy. To do that means taking Robbins book title as aspiration. How can Oregon State become a people's college, deeply woven into the fabric of the state of Oregon, and also with national and global reach and impact?

Jane Lubchenco's call in her 1998 *Science* article, "Entering the century of the environment: a new social contract for science" suggests a path forward. She calls for "good judgment, wisdom, and humility" on the part of scientists. A group of us, scientists, engaged political theorists, and civic organizers, took up this call in a 2014 National Science Foundation workshop. We built on several years of work between infant development and other scientists in fields of heath sciences, climate change, plant pathology, and family social science, drawing on our networks who have theorized

and practiced public work. We found common ground about the need for a different kind of politics, crossing bridges, to bridge the knowledge war; the idea that the aim of science needs to be collective empowerment or civic agency; and the concept of citizens, including scientists as citizens, as generators of the best solutions to complex public problems. I'll return to this, explaining why I believe Oregon State can be a global hub for civic science. Let me start with the crisis and with a story.

The crisis

These are turbulent times. "Americans are losing faith in democracy – and each other," wrote Nathaniel Persily and Jon Cohen in the *Washington Post*. [1]It's important to recognize this is a global crisis. Alarm about democracy is growing around the world. "Warning signs [are] flashing red," as Amanda Taub put it in the *New York Times.*[2] Higher education is part of the crisis. According to Pew Research Center research, 58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country. Thirty-five percent say the effect is positive. This is a radical increase skepticism from two years ago.

What's going on? Higher education is not a dependent variable. We bear an important measure of responsibility. We also have power to change our narrative. Here's another story reflecting today's patterns of civic identity and practice.

In January, 2013, our Center for Democracy and Citizenship partnered with the mayor of the City of Falcon Heights, Minnesota, to moderate a citizen town hall. I had written a letter which the New York Times after the terrible shooting in Newtown Connected arguing that government gun laws by themselves cannot fix the problem. They used it as the basis for a Readers Forum. Many responded with ideas about how

lay citizens can help quell violence in schools. The audience of 25 or so in the Town Hall included the mayor, the police chief, the city manager, teachers, a local principal, social agency workers, a university professor from the College of Architecture and Design, four students, business entrepreneurs in IT—and two elderly residents. The residents expressed regret that “there are only two citizens.”

No one who came as professionals and workers asked about residents’ definition of citizen as volunteer. When I raised the question it prompted a lively conversation about how much more power there might be in the community to address gun violence – and other issues -- if people saw their work in civic and empowering terms and if work sites became civic sites. I imagined what could happen across the world if universities begin preparing students for citizen careers who can turn their workplaces, from businesses and congregations to government and schools, to civic sites.

The shrinking of citizenship is linked to the shrinking of democracy.

When I was a young man I worked as a field secretary for the citizenship schools of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization Martin Luther King headed in the freedom movement. The schools, informal grassroots, empowering workshops taught nonviolence, literarcy, and empowering practices, kind of community organizing 101. People practiced citizenship through their work in many places in the movement including the grassroots citizenship schools. For instance, many citizenship schools were held in beauty parlors because beauticians across the south had been brought together by Highlander Folk School to strategize about how to deepen the civic purposes and practices of their work.

Moreover, my mentors in the movement saw democracy as far more than voting,

though voting rights was a crucial goal. According to Septima Clark, whom King called “the mother of the movement,” the purpose of the whole movement was not simply civil rights. It was “to broaden the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepen the concept to include every relationship.”[3] Vincent Harding, friend and speechwriter for Martin Luther King, put it, “The civil rights movement was in fact a powerful outcropping of the continuing struggle for the expansion of democracy in the United States…it demonstrates…the deep yearning for a democratic experience that is far more than periodic voting.”[4]

The movement drew on traditions of democracy in higher education, reflected in the Truman Commission on Higher Education in 1947: “The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all its levels and in all its fields of specialization it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and processes” [5]

Land grant colleges were central to this purpose. Let me recommend two resources, in addition to Bill Robbins book. Jess Gilbert’s *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal,* from Yale University press tells the story of how, from 1935 to 1941, a group of agrarian leaders in the Department of Agriculture worked with land grant colleges and scientists, cooperative extension workers, and community leaders to develop an enormous initiative in rural America. “They strongly supported historical traditions, local knowledge, regional cultures, cohesive communities, and practices like family farming.” Their efforts generated a discussion across rural America including farm organizations and unions, churches, youth clubs, professional and business groups, and government agencies, training about 60,000 discussion leaders. More than three million people took part. Parallel “Philosophy Schools” on large topics related to challenges of modern society for 35,000

extension agents and others sought to broaden professionals' perspectives beyond the disciplinary boundaries in which they had been socialized.

A second resource is *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* from Harvard Press by the historian Andrew Jewett. Jewett describes what he called the scientific democrats at the heart of these efforts, "Many…understood the term 'science' to include the social forces that shaped the application – and perhaps even the production – of scientific knowledge." In such a "dynamic concept of science," said Charles Kellogg, a leading soil scientist in USDA, "the ***relevancy*** of fact is as important to truth as fact itself." "so what?" questions need always to be added to the question "Is it so?"[6] Soil conservation scientists at USDA and at land grants had a principle crucial to revive: a scientist was not to offer his opinion about what might be done to stem soil erosion until she or he became deeply familiar with a community, its history, culture, conflicts, politics, and economy. Scientific democrats saw science as based on cultural practices like cooperative effort and experimental inquiry which were crucial to the democratic way of life.

I would argue that Lubchenco's 1998 call revives this tradition.

One thing to note, in view of the ferocious controversies today about science, is that the public work of scientists in the 1930s consciously integrated different ways of knowing. "The agrarian New Dealers did not place 'supreme confidence' in science, says Gilbert, "Their vision of democratic planning stood second to none in its promise of transforming rural American into a more egalitarian society [with] a wider distribution of power and resources for common people."[7] The different ways of knowing were illustrated well by soil conservative scientists, who consistently stressed the need for

soil scientists to become familiar with the culture, history, economics, and politics of communities before offering any ideas on what to do about soil erosion.

These ideas of democracy, citizenship, and science have shrunk. Last year in the election when candidates talked about "democracy," every one meant elections. Democracy as elections is conventional wisdom. The site of the US Agency of International Development propagates this concept around the world: "Democracy refers to a civilian political system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through competitive elections with universal suffrage."[8]

Not so long ago we heard a different view of democracy and citizenship in the national discussion. Barack Obama talked about the necessity of a rebirth of citizenship throughout the 2008 campaign, arguing we need "all hands on deck" to make much progress on the largest challenges. His message was ignored or derided in the mainstream press, as the civic scholar Peter Levine discovered through careful review of the coverage. Shrinking ideas are fed by the knowledge wars.

In higher education two epistemologies, detached scientific rationality and what might be called oppression studies rooted in humanities disciplines, are engaged in a sharp conflict. This conflict and the epistemologies of both operating in public life and politics contribute to declining public support for higher education.

Science, as it developed in the last 60 years advanced what the land grant historian Scott Peters calls the heroic narrative about higher education, "science-based service." As an ad for Colorado State puts it in the Denver airport: Community Problems, University Solutions. This grows from a shift in the very concept of science to emphasize value free techniques. As Jewett details, "The scientists who powerfully

shaped the national discourse on science in the middle years of the twentieth century drew a sharp line between science and society. They portrayed science as a space untouchable by both the state and the horizontal communication between citizens." [9]

Donna Shalala, then-Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, in a famous speech "Mandate for a New Century," embodied this view. She called for renewal of the fabled Wisconsin Idea in 1989 but also redefined it into an unabashedly technocratic approach. As she said, "The ideal [is] a disinterested technocratic elite… society's best and brightest in service to its most needy [dedicated to] delivering the miracles of social science [on society's problems] just as doctors cured juvenile rickets in the past."[10] Her vision was progressive and well intentioned. She named many problems that universities should address, from the environment and racism to school reform and intergroup violence. But it is not hard to see why her view might make people angry if they believe that they have more to contribute to public problems than gratitude.

There is an epistemological dynamic at work. William Davies, a political scientist at the University of London, discovered that those who had voted to leave, working class communities often compared to rural areas which voted for Trump in the US, were colored blue on the map. Those who voted against Brexit were colored yellow. "The big blob of yellow…ran westwards out of London toward Oxford and Bristol…Look even more closely at the map and something else appears: Amidst large seas of blue there are flecks of yellow representing smaller cities such as Leicester, Exeter, Newcastle, and Norwich. And one thing these cities all possess is a university." Davies suggested the hidden dynamic. "Universities are connected to one another at a global scale, operating with forms of abstract knowledge and esoteric languages…they employ

people who specialize in 'knowing *that,'* but not necessarily in 'knowing *how*.' They generate trust on the basis of formal credentials and empirical records, not on the basis of identity or shared myth." [11] Rural communities in the voting were thinking in relational terms, not about cultural diversity. The drive for tribal-like relational identities is intensifying across the world.

The other major current of thought in higher education, rooted in the humanities and cultural disciplines, takes what Scott Peters calls the "tragic" view of today's knowledge systems. It has "a *descending* plotline of economic, political, cultural and environmental destruction and loss." The tragic view is associated with sophisticated studies of oppressive patterns of power in higher education. The approach called Intersectionality is especially influential. Like positivist science, Intersectionality has important insights. For instance Kimberle Crenshaw, the founding figure in the framework of Intersectionality, is highly skilled at demonstrating the hidden exclusions and biases that grow from a singular angle of vision on oppressive relationships, such as feminism or anti-racism. She shows that court cases which use the lens of either racial oppression or sexual oppression without understanding the way they interact render African American women invisible.[12]

The oppression studies framework also has significant limits, brought into relief by the theoretical movement in special education called disability studies, which has some resemblances but also clear differences. Disability studies has emerged as an internal critique to the medical model. It reframes "disability" as a social, cultural, and political construction, in contrast to a clinical, medical, or therapeutic one. "Critical special educators…foreground issues such as special education's insular, reductionist

approach to research," write Jan Valle and David Connor. They challenge "an overreliance on the remediation of deficits; sustained use of intelligence testing; commonplace segregation based on disability and/or race; the professionalization of school failure; and the continued medicalization of disabled people."[13] But there are important differences with oppression studies perspectives. Disabilities studies' view of the person, its ontology, especially focuses on strengths hidden by culturally constructive identities, an emphasis often missing in oppression studies. It is sophisticated about discerning oppressive patterns of labelling but it eschews language of victimization. It advances a program for positive action, the development of skills of individual and collective agency. These traits enabled the Augsburg Special Education department to join disabilities studies theory with the empowering public work politics of the youth civic education initiative Public Achievement. The marriage has had early but dramatic successes in changing pedagogies which are disempowering and broken, as well as young teachers' own understandings of their work and future careers.

Fights between science and oppression camps may seem like obscure academic controversies. But the came into the center of the nation's public life in the 2016 election. Republicans such as Scott Walker, Ted Cruz and Donald Trump attacked that higher education as the site of identity politics. After the election Mark Lilla, historian of ideas at Columbia who calls himself a centrist Democrat, a champion of "the spirit of sciences," argued in a famous New York Times editorial that oppression studies, translated into electoral politics, has brought forth an identity politics reaction among rural communities and white working class voters in response. In turn he has been condemned by champions of identity politics like Ta-Nehisi Coates.[14]

Both positivist science and oppression studies contribute insights to our knowledge of the world. But without reviving land grant traditions which integrate different kinds of knowledge they offer only partial views which feed the knowledge war fragmenting society. Moreover both shape professional identities of society's leaders to think of themselves as outsiders, not part of a civic life. One side conceives of citizens as clients and consumers to be served by experts. The other conceives of people as oppressed victims to be championed. In neither case are lay citizens seen as fellow citizens full of agency and talents, engaged with scholars in building a common world. The dominant epistemologies in higher education have in common the premise that democracy is centered in government. Let me suggest three resources for higher education to take leadership in overcoming these knowledge wars.

Public scholarship: In 1997 the Kellogg Foundation asked our center in 1997 to make an assessment of possibilities for revitalizing the land grand mission of the University of Minnesota. Edwin Fogelman, chair of the Political Science Department, and I had divided up a list of several dozen senior professors. Each of us asked if they went into their fields with any desire for public impact. The question surfaced dramatic and hidden discontents. Faculty felt frustrated by the deepening norms of detachment which hold "value neutrality" to be constitutive of scholarly excellence. Many, widely seen as leaders in their fields, told me that they would not be able even to discuss their discontents given the biases against public engagement.[15]

Working with the provost, Robert Bruininks, we created a university wide task force on revitalizing the land grant mission through strengthening the public dimensions

of scholarship, teaching, and community engagement. We worked for two years, and there are many lessons. Here I want to highlight the work around public scholarship.

Aware of the politics of knowledge in higher education we asked a senior scientist, Vic Bloomfield, former vice provost for research to chair the public scholarship committee. Using a public work approach, instead of advancing models of what public scholarship look likes (though the task force produced many resources for the discussion) we asked colleges and disciplines questions like, "what would it mean to make your scholarship and research more public? What incentive structures and assessments need could support scholarship as public work?"

Civic Studies: The transdisciplinary field of Civic Studies also speaks powerfully to epistemological fragmentation. Founded in 2007 by a group of seven, all of us engaged political theorists, our group included Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics for work on citizen-centered governance of common pool resources. Civic Studies calls for the integration of empirical, normative, and action fields. One of our colleagues, Philip Nyden, co-chair of the American Sociological Association's Task Force on Public Sociology has made the case about the action dimension missing in conventional academic life. As he puts it, every sociology department has a course called "social problems" but he hasn't found one that has something called "social solutions." He says, "Academics may be well trained in methodology and theory, but they are not always trained or experienced in…the political process of bringing about change…[their] 'problem-oriented' approach-- which assumes that the community has a deficit – obscures that fact that *academic researchers themselves may have a deficit* that needs to be corrected by experienced community leaders and activists."[16]

Civic Science: We began working in 2005 with colleagues and students of the late Esther Thelen, the brilliant child development scientist. The Delta Center, founded by her distinguished student John Spencer, a leading scientist of infant brain development and system theory, was a key partner. We involved Molly John, former undersecretary for research at USDA, Sherry Abbott, the climate science advisor to President Obama, and many others. The National Science Foundation supported a workshop in 2014.

Civic science addresses the knowledge war by stressing the need for multiple kinds of knowledge to address the biggest challenges facing our nation—climate, energy security, health care, a sustainable and just food system and many others. Today disagreements emerge not only around values and goals, but also over what "facts" are, and what methods generate reliable information. There is misunderstanding between scientists and members of the general public. Scientists often believe that their work is not valued by citizens who may have last encountered science in high school. Lay citizens may feel that scientists' approaches invalidate their experiences and condescend to their intelligence. Meanwhile, fights within higher education between the STEM fields and the humanities feed a furious war about identity politics.

Civic science advances a framework for transcending this knowledge war, while producing better knowledge that can enhance our collective democratic capacities for effective action. There are two defining features: One is the idea that integrating different kinds of knowledge and knowledge practices through a cross-partisan, pluralist knowledge politics can increase civic muscle, civic agency. The other is the question of identity. Public work develops the citizen identities of all participants—regardless of formal credentials. People act in their capacity *as citizens*, prioritizing deliberative and

collaborative work, learning respect for others talents. In my view civic science embodies Jane Lubchenco's 1998 call for a new social contract between scientists and society, in which scientists exercise "good judgment, wisdom, and humility." And I believe Oregon State University has potential to be a global center.

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[1] For earlier alarms, see Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, *New York Times*, September 15, 2015.
[2] Amanda Taub, "How Stable Are Democracies? 'Warning Signs Are Flashing Red,' *New York Times*, November 29, 2016.
[3] Ibid., p. 294. On purpose Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi* Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1965), p. 68.
[4] Vincent Harding *Hope and History; Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 5-6. Boyte's experiences as a young man in the movement regularly involved discussions about a broadened view of democracy.
[5] President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 102
[6] Andrew Jewett, "The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* Vol. 49, No. 4 (2013), p. 412.
[7] Jess Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 8-9. See also Harry Boyte, "Democratic Awakening," BillMoyers.Com, October 14, 2016.
[8] *USAID AID Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance* (Washington: US Government Printing, 2013), 37.

[10] Donna Shalala, "Mandate for a New Century" http://www.uic.edu/depts/oaa/ddh/ddhlectures/Lec11.pdf
[11] William Davies, "A Review of Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in their Own Land,*" *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society,* July 5, 2017, on-lined accessed September 4, 2017.
[12] See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* Vol. 43 (1993), pp. 1241-1299
[13] Jan W. Valle and David J. Connor, *Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), xii.
[14] Mark Lilla, The End of Identity Liberalism, *New York Times* November 18, 2016; also "Isaiah Berlin Against the Current," *New York Review of Books* April 25, 2013, accessed on-line September 15, 2017; the "Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President," *The Atlantic,* October 2017.
[15] See Harry C. Boyte, *Public Engagement in a Civic Mission* (Kettering Foundation, 2000); and Boyte, *Everyday Politics,* Chapter Eight.
[16] Philip Nyden "Public Sociology, Engaged Research, and Civic Education," in *Civic Studies,* p. 109.