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The Global Public Good: Students, Higher Education, and Communities of Good

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Abstract: In this editorial, the guest editors introduce the purpose and cohesion of the manuscripts that form this special issue. The articles and essays of this special issue are intended to extend and develop the case made in the UNESCO (2015) report, *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good*, in its call for dialog. The editors also highlight the role of colleges and universities in developing the capacity for creating and sustaining the public good and then acting on this understanding with conviction and intent. They encourage readers to think of the shared good they hope to enact through educating students, and to apply the knowledge created as necessarily being local and global, personal and social, public and common. They also stress the importance of the UNESCO (2015) report, *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good*, which sets forth an agenda for rethinking all levels of education globally with the determined purpose of using the power of education to elevate the human community and to make our shared world a better place to live. The editorial closes with a call to rethink education for the benefit of the global common good, which should stimulate purposeful action by faculty and institutional leaders.

Keywords: UNESCO report, rethinking education, community engagement, public good, global common good, higher education contribution

There is no more powerful transformative force than education – to promote human rights and dignity, to eradicate poverty and deepen sustainability, to build a better future for all, founded on equal rights and social justice, respect for cultural diversity, and international solidarity and shared responsibility, all of which are fundamental aspects of our common humanity. (UNESCO, 2015)

This broad and challenging statement is the foundation for this special issue of *Higher Learning Research Communications*, which is devoted to exploring the role of colleges and universities in first recognizing their role in developing the capacity for creating and sustaining the public good and then acting on this understanding with conviction and intent. The UNESCO report sets forth an agenda for rethinking all levels of education globally with the determined purpose of using the power of education to elevate the human community and to make our shared world a better place to live.

Along with introducing the purpose and cohesion of the essays that form this special issue, we also wish to highlight the *force* on which all of these lofty hopes depend: educated students. Without question, the authors who wrote these essays understand and appreciate the importance of students, especially as the prepared and empowered agents of future actions that

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will be sustainably transformative in the conduct of their lives. In fact, students are so pervasively important to most discussions of higher education and the public good, including the UNESCO report, that they are often taken for granted in a rush to address institutional and faculty responsibilities. However, no student of any age or educational goal should ever be far from consideration. They are indeed fully present in the essays that comprise this issue of *Higher Learning Research Communications*.

Public Good, Common Good, Global Good

The UNESCO authors make a distinction between the “public” good and the “common” good, perhaps reflecting habits of thought in different regions of the world as much as a moral or philosophical divide. For purposes of this report, however, we have elected to focus on the shared *good*, regardless of the antecedent arguments as to whether that good is *public* or *common* (or both). The terms tend to be used interchangeably throughout the volume. The prevailing terminology in the United States tends toward the public good. One important distinguishing element, however, claimed for the alternative formulation is as inherent in the essays that this special issue comprises as it is in the concept: “The common good is therefore inherent to the relationships that exist among the members of a society tied together in a collective endeavor” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 78). These endeavors may be local in a community where all members of society are known to each other and the benefits are palpable, or global in a community where its members are known only in their shared humanity and the benefits are relative. The contributing authors of this issue explore the collective nature of purposeful action to enhance the quality of life for others through the instrumentality of postsecondary education.

We encourage readers to think of the shared good that we hope to enact through educating students, and applying the knowledge we create as necessarily being local and global, personal and social, public and common.

As editors of a special issue seeking to take a global perspective on the public good, we invited prospective authors from around the world to submit abstracts for consideration, including leading scholars and practitioners whom we actively encouraged to submit essays. A distinguished panel of 14 global scholars, policy makers, administrators, and activists from seven nations did a blind peer review of each submission. The result is 13 manuscripts involving about 20 authors from the United States, China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. While all of the essays address global conditions and issues, the majority of the authors are from the United States. This explains that the vantage point for reflecting on the role of higher education in developing a global public good may appear to skew the analyses. As we read the essays and the reviewers’ comments, however, we were convinced that the overall collection of essays offers a diverse, multifaceted, and multicultural view of the central issues. The essays collected here do, indeed, reflect a global perspective.

The voices participating in the discussion are quite varied in their experiences and degrees of global engagement, but all are refreshing and generative in their approach to the specific topics, which attain a collective coherence based on the distinctive role of postsecondary education worldwide, but one that the UNESCO (2015) report says “needs to be redefined in the context of increased global competition” because the “landscape of higher education is being transformed by the diversification of structures and institutions” (p. 52). The essays fall into three sections: the conceptual frameworks and considerations, the advantages to communities of global considerations of the public good, and the actual work of institutions in creating a global public, or common, good. A concluding essay takes up the looming issues

related to the globalization of an academic workforce that is also experiencing challenges of de-professionalization.

Enacting the Public Good

We explore in depth the contribution that colleges and universities make to the public good as a return on social investment (Shaker & Plater, 2016a; Shaker & Plater, 2016b). Worldwide, all forms and levels of education are under intense public scrutiny precisely because these agencies are known to be essential to personal as well as national development. The twin demands of access and quality thus place unprecedented financial strains on institutions—increasingly inviting innovations that are as unproven as they are disruptive. The calls for “more and better” resound in echoes of productivity and efficiency, pitting the immediacy of economic gains against the hope of societal good. They should, in fact, be the same. This is clearly an era of worldwide transformation shaken by uncontrollable forces. The role that higher education will play in bridging its proven historic value across a perilous present to the “better future” envisioned in the 2015 UNESCO report requires purpose *and* action.

Seeking clarity about the role of higher education in contributing to the public good, we argue that, in general, higher education acts on four principal domains: educating students for citizenship (based on competencies that enable them to function well in an interdependent world society)¹; educating students for employment (based on skills, knowledge, and experiences that enable them to adapt rapidly to changing conditions); creation of knowledge; and the application and use of knowledge to benefit the communities of which the institutions are a part (Shaker & Plater, 2016a; Shaker & Plater, 2016b). The essays in this special issue address the four roles for institutions as actors in contributing to the public good.

Institutions, however, are dependent on the people who work at, for, and on their behalf. Organizations and their staff create knowledge and its applications as well as provide educational services, whether these entities are governmentally sponsored, nonprofit, or for-profit; whether they provide degrees or sub-degree credentials; whether they are specialized or comprehensive; whether they use physical, virtual or hybrid delivery systems; whether they are highly ranked or not. UNESCO (2015) notes that “the status and working conditions of the academic profession worldwide are under strain due to both mass access and budget constraints. ... [T]he professoriate is confronting significant difficulties everywhere” (p. 56). Consideration of the changing nature of the academic profession is an essential aspect of understanding the future role of institutions of higher education in enacting the public good.

Along with the 2015 UNESCO report, a second catalyst for this special issue was a recent collection of essays compiled and edited by one of us titled *Faculty Work and the Public Good: Philanthropy, Engagement, and Academic Professionalism*. Some of the United States’ leading scholars of philanthropy and faculty work deliberated the nature of faculty contributions to the public good as “voluntary action for the public good” (Payton, 1988, p. 3), one of the prevailing definitions of philanthropy. The volume explores in depth how considering faculty contributions to the public good can “generate a new strategy for recognizing how institutions can be citizens through the efforts of their faculty and the public use of their knowledge and scholarship” (Shaker, p. 14). Whether or not the nature of faculty work is philanthropic, the

¹ There are noteworthy ongoing debates about educating students for global citizenship as advocated by Martha Nussbaum, for example, versus preparing globally competent citizens, who are expected to act locally while being aware globally—and possessing the skills and knowledge to act effectively in an interdependent world. A recent critique has argued that “the political economy of higher education for developing global citizenship [is] a corporate endeavor” and argued that international higher education “should refocus on good citizenship instead as a moral imperative” to global citizenship (Nicoitra & Patel, 2016, p. 1).

specific contribution faculty make to the public good precisely because they are professionals—with a sense of duty to the public—is a necessary consideration for the institution’s role. Academic professionalism is inherently an aspect of the essays and is the focus of the concluding essay.

Conceptual Frameworks

Through four disparate essays, the special issue’s opening section looks at some of the concepts underlying the role of higher education in addressing the public good. In an editorial, Gary Rhoades raises questions about the globalization of higher education worldwide and the purposes and methods of recruiting students from other nations. He asks specifically whether the seemingly beneficial aspects of student interactions across traditional cultural, political, economic, or religious differences incidental to postsecondary attendance in nations other than their own are actually prompted by a concern for developing the global public good. Or if, in fact, they are mechanisms of private benefit for both students and the institutions serving them. He does find notable exceptions to his overall conclusion that universities in the United Kingdom and the United States are seeking international students largely as revenue sources perhaps to the detriment of the public good. The greater concern, however, is for the actions and intentions of the majority of institutions worldwide.

Bart Houlahan and Dan Osusky, in contrast, explore how for-profit institutions can deliver educational services that generate revenue for shareholders and also serve the public good. The emergence of public benefit corporations whose charters include a specific authority to define public beneficial work and activities—even at the expense of revenue production—open the door to doing well by doing good. They describe a process by which institutions of higher education worldwide can seek third-party certification of their contribution to the public good through a standards-based self-study and external review. B Lab, the certifying organization they represent, has developed a tool for self-assessment that all institutions might apply to reflections on the purposes and means for their own work even if they are governmentally supported public institutions, nonprofit colleges and universities, or sub-degree certificate providers.

With particular attention to Africa, Shiko Gathuo reviews the tradition of U.S. colleges and universities in raising controversial social issues of great public importance that are often side stepped by other organizations. U.S. institutions address, at times, domestic issues of racial and gender equality, income disparity, and environmental justice among many other such concerns, but global issues affecting poor nations are not as aggressively pursued. What are the underlying concepts that suggest a role for American universities in other nations? The essay explores factors that appear constraining and urges U.S. institutions to be self-aware in seeking to contribute to the public good internationally.

One possible conceptual basis for institutions’ acting to advance a global common good may lie in their mission. Faith-based institutions that represent a wide diversity of religions may be “in a unique position to be particularly effective in their work of serving local communities and preserving a global good precisely because of their faith-informed and motivated missions,” as Jessica Rose Daniels and Jacqueline N. Gustafson state in an essay that asks how different faiths might come together to address a shared public good. While not sufficient, starting the conversation about collaboration toward shared specific goals within the context of the United Nation’s sustainability goals may open possibilities that would enable collective action when religious differences might otherwise lead to separate and even conflicting actions.

Global Public Good for the Benefit of Communities

A claim we make for the public good work of higher education is preparing globally competent citizens—equipping graduates or program completers with the knowledge, skills, and experiences to act effectively to enhance the common good (Shaker & Plater, 2016a). In the first essay of this section, John D. Reiff describes how one state in the United States is taking steps to ensure that graduates of its public institutions have the capacity for effective civic action based on an assessment of their abilities, possibly as a condition of graduation. While allowing institutions flexibility in the means and attributes of achieving this goal, the state of Massachusetts recognizes the need to augment vocational goals with civic goals as a specific way to improve the quality of life of communities.

Preparing students to engage meaningfully and responsibly with their local and global communities depends on an ability to “read,” or understand, not only the communities being engaged but also their own role or status within the communities. Bidhan Roy begins with a premise that the starting point for such understanding comes from disciplinary knowledge instead of volunteerism or service disassociated from an intellectual grounding—specifically drawing on literature as the discipline from which to engage with communities. Drawing on concepts advanced by Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams decades ago, Roy offers a proposal for global community engagement based on the classroom experiences of students who rely on an understanding of cultural literacy to place “themselves as participants within a global commons, rather than passive recipients of neoliberal globalization.”

The University of Pennsylvania’s (Penn) commitment to advancing the public good began even before the United States became a nation. Partnerships are a means Penn uses to develop the institution’s role in both education and community enhancement. Ira Harkavy, Matthew Hartley, Rita Axelroth Hodges, and Joann Weeks discuss the very concrete paths taken by their university locally as the best means to address global problems and issues. Their example holds promise for how other institutions working intentionally locally can have an impact globally. Drawing on the wisdom of John Dewey and his conclusion that democracy is perhaps the form of social organization that most closely approaches the ideal, the authors draw on Penn’s experiences in the Westside neighborhood of Philadelphia. They describe the role of institutions in contributing to the public good and the obstacles that have diminished their impact, document the value of working locally to advance the public good, and illustrate through the university’s efforts a strategy for making a global impact.

As a final contribution to the section addressing specific conceptual bases for higher education’s role, Desiree D. Zerquera generalizes about the place of urban serving research universities, extending beyond the University of Pennsylvania model to include public institutions with distinctive missions explicitly recognizing their duty to serve highly diverse urban populations (often focused on residents historically underserved by education) and themselves drawing on the assets of the communities they serve. Making international comparisons, the essay seeks to inform the strategies that universities worldwide might use in contributing to the global common good by the ways in which they educate locally. The essay takes note of inherent tensions in urban serving research universities that are often stretching their missions to attain higher levels of recognition and prestige globally while struggling to meet the needs of the community being served locally.

Creating the Global Common Good

Cagla Okten and Peren Kerim Arin explore how the concepts advanced by Shaker and her contributors in *Faculty Work and the Public Good* can best be understood in a global, non-U.S. context. Drawing substantively on examples from Turkey, the authors examine the key forces that shape faculty work, including institutional structure and purpose, employment frameworks, resource constraints, and discretionary constraints, including political. They note major cultural differences among institutions globally, such as an emphasis on “particularism” among Western colleges and universities whereas the authors believe institutions in the Middle East, for example, tend toward a “universalism” that institutes rules and regulations allowing very little discretion for faculty in the use of their time and effort—a key argument advanced for the philanthropic nature of faculty work in the American context. In noting the value of opening a discussion of academics’ self-concepts about the nature of their work, the authors suggest that comparative analyses and self-reflection may play a useful part in a more intentional shaping of the evolving academic workforce—and their work as a contribution to the global public good.

Increasingly interconnected patterns of interaction and relationships on a global scale are ushering in a new era of change that will require colleges and universities to adapt in many ways, but none as important as the ways in which students are educated. Globalization offers both exciting opportunity and an unprecedented range of complexities for institutions willing to engage thoughtfully with the ambiguities of the changes underway. Drawing on her experiences in leading three American universities toward a greater awareness of their responsibilities to the communities they serve, Judith Ramaley discusses what should be expected of globally prepared graduates—what they should know and be able to do. She advocates clear learning outcomes—not unlike those proposed by the state of Massachusetts—and a sequential path of experiences leading from the first year of college through graduation. Ramaley sees the results of such an education as contributing to the global common good by preparing citizens who can grapple ethically and responsibly with the Big Questions facing the world.

Developing a research-based approach to understanding faculty motivations for contributing to the public good, Iris M. Yob undertook a series of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews of faculty and administrators in several countries to explore why they seek to fulfill social responsibilities of the kinds envisioned by the UNESCO (2015) report. Campus-community partnerships were identified as a major means for addressing both local and more widely distributed social problems, and the survey sought to understand how and why faculty would choose to engage in this form of community service. A shared perception of “responding to a sense of duty” appears to underlie the motivations across faculty and administrative lines as well as national differences, but the interpretation and legitimization of “duty” not surprisingly varies according to religious and political differences. Yob noted that “cultural context also influenced whether participants saw their impact as empowering their service partners [more common among emerging or transitional communities where self-improvement or making a better future were prevalent] or establishing social justice [more common in established communities where participants saw themselves as relatively privileged].”

Zhu Jiangang’s essay provides a historical context for the evolution and development of higher education’s contribution to the public good in China, tracing phenomena from the Confucian philosophy of education through the early 20th century, when Western philosophy dramatically replaced the traditional approach, to the Maoist period when the Communist Party’s revolutionary thought dominated, culminating in the Cultural Revolution during which many schools and universities were closed. In the late 1970’s Chinese higher education revived, and Zhu explores how the nation has addressed the role of higher education in contributing to the

public good since then. He introduces the traditional Chinese cultural concept of the common good, how the concept is manifested in educational practices, and how it leads to an alternative approach to higher education. He describes in detail his own experiences in developing service learning as a means to help students at Sun Yat-Sen University realize that there is a common good to which they can contribute. It is fitting that UNESCO (2015) begins with a quotation from Confucius: “Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace” (UNESCO, p. 14).

Genevieve Shaker’s concluding essay returns attention to the role of faculty in particular and the changing nature of academic work due to a range of issues, not the least of which is the globalization of education through technology and, as Rhoades discusses, the recruitment of international students worldwide. That there is a global academic workforce emerging should not be surprising, but what may catch many nations off guard is the degree of mobility a global market creates, especially when faculty may not need to leave their homes to be instructors in other nations. Shaker makes the point, as does the UNESCO (2015) report, that the challenges facing institutions in securing adequately prepared and committed faculty are a global issue, not one limited to developing nations. The global North and the global South are experiencing increasingly similar issues. In her earlier work, Shaker raises the same questions as UNESCO with regard to the de-professionalization of the professoriate and the emergence of a much more transient and contingent workforce.

The 13 manuscripts this special issue are intended to extend and develop the case made in *Rethinking Education* in its call for dialog: “Its purpose is to stimulate public policy debate focused specifically on education in a changing world” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 9). The audience for this special issue is potentially large, including policy makers, organization and foundation executives, media, and even concerned individual citizens, but it is addressed especially to faculty whose own global conditions of work are changing so quickly as to require immediate attention and action in the face of an abrupt transformation from a profession to a workforce—and a fragmented and unbundled one at that. Not all colleges, universities, or even nations will be forced into accepting something like the gig economy of part-time, contingent workers whose reduced labor costs can accommodate greater access at diminished quality. But immune as some parts of the global society may be, they will still be subject to the vagaries of a disrupted and perhaps failed network of institutions whose graduates are not equal to society’s serious challenges in health, environment, climate, food, peace, economic equity, and more. The essays of this volume should encourage faculty to act on behalf of themselves, their profession, their institution, their nation, and their shared world.

Let’s Not Forget the Students

Change comes slowly, incrementally, in higher education despite disruptions that occur due to political change, economic crises, or other factors. And changes once made to higher education tend to endure. Consider the longevity of the lecture despite technological and pedagogical advances supported by research in cognitive science that suggest there are more active and effective ways for students to learn. Nonetheless, we are in the midst of a quiet but decades-long revolution—disguised as a paradigm shift—that places the student at the center of learning, not the teacher or faculty. The full implications of this change are not yet fully understood, accepted, and managed by faculty even as major adjustments in pedagogy, technology, assessment of learning, and standards for quality assurance have transformed not only classrooms but also institutional goals and national measures of institutional performance.

As evidence mounts that postsecondary education is essential for both personal success and the economic competitiveness of states, demands for access have grown dramatically, exceeding capacity in most nations, and creating a crisis in both access and the quality of the education provided in response to demand. In her closing essay, Shaker touches on this aspect of the UNESCO (2015) document in noting the growing global crisis stemming from a lack of adequately prepared faculty and the resulting devaluation of credentials as students leave institutions with degrees and certificates but without the knowledge, skills, and experience equal to the demands of employment or of sustainable global development. Inadequately, incompletely, and indifferently educated students are always a personal loss and tragedy, but collectively their inability to take capable and effective roles in developing the global common good places everyone and every nation at risk—even those whose own educational attainments give them temporary privilege and security.

The focus on students, the processes of their learning, and the evidence of their success in assessed learning outcomes validated by recognized qualifications frameworks is increasingly accepted across not only nations but also globally engaged professional associations and transnational employers. Student mobility is one result, as students with the financial means and personal motivation to seek out the best quality education they can afford leads to some of the questionable results identified by Rhoades. At best, however, mobility is a temporary and stop-gap measure—not a solution for the massification of higher education. Education may breed confidence, but inadequate education breeds resentment and revolution.

Out of such circumstances opportunities for innovation abound, and many are being tried—including a range of new providers whose services do not offer traditional degrees but instead verified competency in well and often narrowly defined domains of learning, especially where knowledge and skill are closely linked to employment and where standards of performance are well established. Some are offered via electronic means on a global scale while others are focused in time and geography. The recognition, exchange, validation, and accumulation of such learning experiences may well lead to new forms of institutions and credentialing, rendering traditional colleges and universities—and their degrees—as only one of several viable options. And the implications for the academic workforce exceed most of our current imaginations.

Regardless of what institutions may do, of how the academic workforce is transformed, or of what forms learning and its validation may take, one thing remains constant: students, who are the subject of education and in turn the transformative force through which UNESCO—and much of the world—hope to build a better future for all. Students may be the constant in higher education, but they are not the same. As generation after generation becomes self-aware, society (and educational institutions) take note of their differences—research on the consumer habits of Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and successors account for shifts of billions of dollars in marketing and commodities, while colleges and universities try to adjust their familiar and proven ways of teaching to address changing expectations.

The newest generation—iGen or Gen-Z—includes those under 20 years of age (a group for whom Facebook is a technology used by “older” people). They are “pure” digital natives, never having been without portable electronic devices and pervasive modes of communication. Despite a lack of consensus on exactly what the changes are among this generation, “many researchers agree that this generational pivot actually *is* unprecedented” (Gibson, 2016). They point to the impact of electronics on neural circuitry of developing brains affecting attention span, the ability to multitask, and the nature of social interaction. They also note that the changes are affecting young people worldwide, although no one knows if the developmental

attributes of iGen are similar across cultures, genders, and economic status. But the global implications for transforming the world are enormous, especially for educational providers of all kinds.

A loosely defined set of discussions about academic activism, too loose to be called a real movement, “scholactivism” is based on the belief that “creators of knowledge can work to ensure the impact of their knowledge is positive. Scholactivists intentionally embrace the reality that their work can lead to social change” (Farnum, 2016). In brief, this “new” form of activism seeks to enhance the global public good. Already in 2009 students at the University of Pennsylvania had created a global video-conferencing network called Dorm Room Diplomacy (DRD) to exchange views with students in other nations for the explicit purpose of increasing knowledge about “others” and reducing reductionist stereotypes. This suggests the possibility of successor generations using not only technology but social goals more intentionally and effectively.

While the preceding iGen or DRD anecdotes are only suggestive of what students may be interested in and able to do in the future, the point is that there really is an unprecedented pivot point in higher education and among those who are being educated—worldwide. Given the enormous forces driving change (such as globalization, technology, communication, a rising global middle class, massification of education) at a time of enormous challenges (climate change, migration, health, terrorism, food and water security, among others), this generation of learners will have unprecedented opportunity (and necessity) of applying *their* learning and *their* new knowledge to the social, political, economic, and physical environments that determine whether there even can be a global common good. It is for this reason that the urgent plea of UNESCO’s (2015) call to rethink education for the benefit of the global common good—and as well the examples and case studies offered in this special issue of *HLRC*—should stimulate purposeful action by faculty and institutional leaders. This action can (and should) use “the relationships that exist among the members of a society tied together in a collective endeavor” (2015, p. 78) to create a global network of communities of good energized by the students whose hands we are entrusting with the future of the world and its humanity.

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