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Changing the Story About Higher Education's Public Purposes and Work: Land-Grants, Liberty, and the Little Country Theatre

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Imagining America

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Foreseeable Futures #6

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Foreseeable Futures

Dear Reader,

I am delighted to announce the publication of *Foreseeable Futures #6*, Scott Peters' *Changing the Story About Higher Education's Public Purposes and Work: Land-Grants, Liberty, and the Little Country Theater.* This powerful essay represents Imagining America's ongoing commitment to developing a concrete understanding of the academy's democratic hopes. Scott Peters brings something new to this enterprise: the history of higher education itself. Specifically, he uncovers the historical relationship between culture and agriculture, building a bridge from Imagining America's usual arena of the arts, humanities, and design to quite different kinds of work that are equally concerned with the layered meanings of place.

Peters uses the strategies of the humanities and the qualitative social sciences to illuminate competing accounts of the public mission of American land-grant colleges. More than that, though, he offers a pragmatic strategy for hope. In the process, he speaks directly to producers of knowledge and culture who are aiming to become truly civic professionals.

Peters tracks the ways in which the relationships between universities and rural communities have been represented and justified, usually by academics themselves. He then uses these narratives to chart the tensions between the economic and democratic purposes of US campuses between 1880 and 1930, tensions that bedevil us in new ways now. His essay shows how the public mission of our colleges and universities has been—and is still being—negotiated through much-debated heroic, tragic, and prophetic metanarratives. And as a leader of the movement for community engagement, he models precisely the kind of critical self-reflection and "public-regarding" practice that he finds in the work of his own colleagues.

We urge you to share this provocative essay with faculty and staff colleagues, community partners, and students. This is a substantially expanded version of Peters' keynote address, delivered at our 2006 national conference in Columbus. Imagining America's conference, hosted by Ohio State University, focused on the theme, *Engaging Through*

Community

Place. We joined with the 2006 Outreach Scholarship Conference, *Engaging Through the Disciplines*, for a day of common programming. As our joint keynoter, Scott Peters found a compelling way to speak to both events.

Peters, a faculty member at Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, offers a historical framework for earlier *Foreseeable Futures* position papers. His immediate predecessors in the series—also historically minded—focused on trends in American higher education in the post-World War II period, particularly in the last decade. In *Foreseeable Futures #5*, John Kuo Wei Tchen explored intercultural teaching and scholarship, rooted in partnerships with diverse communities on-and off-campus. Tchen brought to the series a passionate focus on undergraduate education and student mentoring, rooted in commitments to New York's immigrant communities. He also gave us a keen sense of the challenge posed to higher education by the global importance of Asia and by non-Eurocentric forms of knowledge. And in *Foreseeable Futures #4*, George Sanchez took up the challenges of campus engagement, educational access, and intercultural projects anchored in the complex histories of Los Angeles neighborhoods. Like Peters, Tchen and Sanchez use the past as a springboard for bolder, more democratic, and more imaginative work in the immediate (that is, foreseeable) future.

I hope that you will join Scott Peters in the difficult pleasures of storytelling and take part in the work of Imagining America. Please visit our web site at: www.imaginingamerica.org.

Julie Ellison
Director

Photo by Donna Lupardo.

Scott Peters

Scott Peters is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Cornell University. He holds a B.S. in Education (1983) from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, an M.A. in Public Policy (1995) from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, and a Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Administration (1998), also from the University of Minnesota. Before his graduate study, he served for nearly ten years (1984-1993) as Program Director of the University YMCA at the University of Illinois, where he worked with students, faculty, staff, and community members on a variety of civic education and community development initiatives. His book, **The Promise of Association** *(University YMCA, 1998), examines the history of the University YMCA for its 125th anniversary.*

With a specific focus on land-grant colleges of agriculture, Dr. Peters' current research program examines and interprets historical and contemporary narratives of the political and cultural identities, roles, purposes, and work of academic institutions and professionals. One of the central problems his research seeks to address is that of understanding the meanings and significance of "democracy" in the experiences and practices of scholars and educators. His work has been published in several journals, including **Agricultural History,** *the* **Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics,** *the* **Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning,** *the* **Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Higher Education Exchange***, and the* **Journal of Extension***. His most recent co-edited books are* **Engaging Campus and Community: The Practice of Public Scholarship in the State and Land-Grant University System** *(Kettering Foundation Press, 2005), and* **Catalyzing Change: Profiles of Cornell Cooperative Extension Educators from Greene, Tompkins, and Erie Counties, New York** *(Cornell University, 2006).*

He is currently at work on a book of contemporary public scholars' profiles from Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. His next projects will include an edited book of essays on Liberty Hyde Bailey's educational philosophy and work, and a book on the origins and contemporary reconstruction of the prophetic narrative about the public purposes and work of land-grant colleges of agriculture that he discusses in this **Foreseeable Futures** *paper.*

Changing the Story About Higher Education's Public Purposes and Work: Land-Grants, Liberty, and the Little Country Theater

Scott Peters

"The history of the land-grant institutions in the United States is the story of the growth of an idea—an idea centered in the democratization of higher learning."

—Arthur J. Klein, 1930

The conversation about higher education's public purposes and work is changing in two important ways. First, there is a changing emphasis with respect to purpose. In many colleges and universities there is a new emphasis on undergraduate liberal education in and for an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. In some, an emphasis is emerging on civic renewal, sustainability, and social and environmental problem-solving. In others, the purpose of improving math and science education in our public schools is being prioritized. In yet others, the emphasis is shifting to the purpose of enhancing economic competitiveness. The second way the conversation is changing has to do with the ways higher education's public work is being named and conceptualized. Instead of public service, extension, and outreach, there is talk of engagement, community-university partnerships, and service-learning. Instead of applied research, we talk of community-based participatory research, action research, the scholarship of engagement, and public scholarship.[1]

In part, these changes reflect the influence of new insights into how and where trustworthy knowledge and theory are developed, and how and where certain kinds of teaching and learning can and should be situated. They also reflect an emerging interest in reconsidering and strengthening the civic mission(s) of the American academy, and the social, political, and cultural roles and responsibilities of the academic profession. Interest in these themes is being generated by a sense of urgency about pressing public issues and problems—an urgency that compelled the late Ernest Boyer to proclaim in 1990 that at "no time in our history has the need been greater for connecting the work

of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus." It is also being generated by a growing concern, if not alarm, about the contemporary trend to commercialize higher education by transforming it from a social institution that produces public goods and advances public interests into an "industry" that produces private goods for the marketplace.[2]

Up against this trend, we need to do more than change the ways we emphasize, order, and conceptualize our public purposes and work. We also need to change the ways we understand their larger meaning and significance. To do this, we need to change the *story* about our public purposes and work. Or, to use the academic term for story, we need to change the *narrative*. As the environmental historian William Cronon has argued, narrative is "our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world." As such, it is essential to the normative process of exercising practical reason: that is, of deciding, based on what we value, what course of action we should take in particular contexts and situations.[3]

As we chart a course of action in our academic institutions, we need to pay attention, in each of our particular locations, to the ways we and others tell the story of our public purposes and work. By story, I do not mean just history. Rather, I mean a live, unfinished narrative in which we position ourselves as active participants. Without such a narrative, we have no way to make sense of our public purposes and work; that is, we have no way to understand their larger meaning and significance.

My own location is in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University. Founded in 1865, Cornell is a major research university. It is also an awkward public-private hybrid, as both a publicly supported land-grant institution and a privately endowed member of the Ivy League. On May 9, 2004 we celebrated the centennial of the designation of Cornell's College of Agriculture as the "New York State College of Agriculture." Mindful of this important event, and of William Cronon's argument about the value and usefulness of narrative, I wrote a proposal in 2003 to conduct a narrative study of the college's

There are three reasons why we should all take an interest in the ways we tell stories about the public purposes and work of land-grant colleges of agriculture.

public purposes and work. Funded by the Kettering Foundation, the study combines historical research with the development, analysis, and interpretation of contemporary stories of faculty members' practices and experiences as publicly-engaged scholars.

In a massive two-volume survey of land-grant colleges and universities, which was published in 1930 by the federal Office of Education, Alfred Klein wrote that the "history of the land-grant institutions in the United States is the story of the growth of an idea—an idea centered in the democratization of higher learning." As I am learning in my study, however, not only the history, but also the live, unfinished narrative of land-grant colleges of agriculture—including my own at Cornell—is not a singular story of the democratization of higher learning. Rather, it is at least three stories, only two of which have anything to do with "democratization," and only two of which are currently being told. The three stories include a dominant heroic meta-narrative about technical and economic progress; a tragic counter-narrative about cultural, economic, political, and environmental oppression and destruction; and a prophetic counter-narrative about the struggle for freedom and sustainability.[4]

While few people care about land-grant colleges of agriculture, there are three reasons why we should all take an interest in the ways the story about their public purposes and work is told. First, we all need to eat. In relation to this reality, serious questions need to be raised about the implications of the dominant heroic meta-narrative for both the sustainability and politics of our food system. Second, reflecting an uncritical acceptance of the heroic meta-narrative, the land-grant system is widely and consistently positioned as the most important and successful historical exemplar of the so-called "service ideal" in American higher education. This way of positioning the land-grant system has deeply problematic implications for the whole of American higher education. It both shapes and constrains the larger conversation about American higher education's civic mission in ways that privilege an untrustworthy and (in my view) undesirable conception of public purpose and work as neutral, unbiased, narrowly instrumental, and apolitical "public service." Third, if we wish to take seriously a recent call for colleges and

universities to act as "vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy," we will need to rethink what Thomas Bender has called the "dilemma of the relation of expertise and democracy." Land-grant colleges of agriculture have a great deal to teach us about the ways academic professionals have perceived and negotiated this dilemma. However, unless we attend to and ultimately change the ways the story of the public purposes and work of these colleges is told, interesting and important lessons about this dilemma—both positive and negative—will remain obscured from view.[5]

With all this in mind, in what follows I provide brief sketches of the heroic meta-narrative and tragic and prophetic counter-narratives of the land-grant story. I then situate the task of changing the story of higher education's public purposes and work within the emerging movement to rethink and renegotiate the social compact between the university and society.

The Heroic Meta-Narrative

Liberty Hyde Bailey is a key figure in the story of Cornell University's public purposes and work. Born on a Michigan farm in 1858, Bailey was a groundbreaking and highly prolific horticultural scientist who joined the faculty at Cornell in 1888. He became the founding Director of Cornell's agricultural extension program in 1894, the first permanent program of its kind in the national land-grant system. He went on to serve as Dean of Cornell's College of Agriculture and Director of its agricultural experiment station from 1903 until his retirement in 1913. It was through his leadership as dean that the New York State legislature designated the college as the "New York State College of Agriculture," appropriating $250,000 to Cornell in 1904 for the construction of new buildings, and $100,000 in 1906 in annually recurring funds to support the operation and maintenance of the college.[6]

There is a story about Bailey that appears several times in historical literatures about Cornell, American higher education, and American agriculture. Here is how Morris Bishop, author of *A History of Cornell*, tells this story:

...What eventually changed their minds...

> The rich vineyards of Chautauqua County were attacked by disease. In 1893, Assemblyman S. F. Nixon of Chautauqua asked the Cornell Experiment Station to investigate. "No funds," said the station. Nevertheless, Liberty Hyde Bailey went to look, identified the disease as black rot, and devised a spray which saved the Assemblyman's vineyard. So delighted was he that he introduced in the Assembly in 1894, and carried through, a bill appropriating $8,000 for experimental work in his district. This was the initiation of extension work in New York State.[7]

The same story, reduced to one sentence, also appears in an important passage in Frederick Rudolph's landmark history of American higher education, *The American College and University*. After noting farmers' skepticism about the value of land-grant colleges during the first few decades of their existence (the national land-grant system was originally established by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890), Rudolph writes that what eventually changed their minds

> was evidence that scientific agriculture paid in larger crops, higher income, and a better chance to enjoy higher living standards—in other words, an opportunity to make frequent use of the Montgomery Ward or Sears Roebuck catalogue. Of primary importance were the pioneer efforts of natural scientists experimenting with seeds, livestock, and chemicals, who began to have something worth showing and saying to the farmers. Essential, too, was the Hatch Act of 1887, which provided federal funds for the creation of agricultural experiment stations which soon became extremely popular and effective instruments in winning farm support for the colleges. For the stations combined science and the solution of specific farm problems and helped to demonstrate to skeptical farmers that science could be a friend. Professor Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell investigated and cured black rot in the vineyards of a member of the state legislature who one day, as speaker of the assembly, would be of crucial help in gaining permanent state support for agricultural education at Cornell.[8]

The little story about Bailey works nicely as a way of locating the public purpose of democratizing knowledge for economic benefit.

By itself, this little story about Bailey curing a disease in a legislator's vineyard is trivial and relatively meaningless. It only becomes significant when it is placed within the context of a larger story. Both Bishop and Rudolph place it in the context of the story about how land-grant colleges of agriculture won the support of farmers and legislators. The way they frame and tell this story, in turn, fits within an even larger story that I refer to as the land-grant system's heroic meta-narrative. The heroic meta-narrative is widely and frequently told and accepted as the one "true" narrative that gives order and meaning to the public purposes and work of land-grant colleges.

In the heroic meta-narrative, the history of the land-grant system is presented as a story about the "democratization of higher learning," to borrow a phrase from Arthur Klein. According to this story, land-grant colleges democratized higher education in three ways: first, by providing the common people with access to a college education, and thereby to opportunities for economic and social mobility; second, by expanding and equalizing the curriculum to make the professions of the common people (i.e., agriculture and the "mechanic arts") as worthy of study as the classics and the professions of elites; and third, by not only developing but also actively extending new scientific knowledge, technologies, and expertise. Importantly, in the meta-narrative each of these purposes is viewed as serving mainly, if not exclusively, technical, economic, and material ends.[9]

The little story about Bailey works nicely as a way of locating the public purpose of democratizing knowledge for economic benefit at the moment of its emergence. It also works as a way of delineating a type of heroic story that was and still is alleged to be common in land-grant colleges of agriculture. According to this story, farmers are beset by technical problems they cannot understand, let alone solve. A scientific expert comes to the rescue. He or she diagnoses the technical problems, develops solutions (in the form of new knowledge and/or technologies), and applies them. The problems are solved, agricultural efficiency and productivity are improved, and the material interests of everyone are simultaneously advanced.

The heroic meta-narrative obscures important political and cultural aspects of the public work of land-grant colleges of agriculture.

In the heroic story, farmers play relatively passive roles as needy clients. They are mainly interested in raising their incomes so they can "make frequent use of the Montgomery Ward or Sears Roebuck catalogue." Land-grant faculty, on the other hand, play active roles as neutral, unbiased, and apolitical scientific experts and public servants. They are equally interested in advancing knowledge in their academic fields and in "meeting the needs" of farmers, consumers, states, and the nation. Their engagement in the world beyond the campus is a means of pursuing both of these interests at the same time. It is therefore cast as being "mutually beneficial." The heroic story is a story of improvement and progress. It has an ascending plotline, reflecting the steady work of thousands of benevolent experts like Liberty Hyde Bailey.

The Tragic Counter-Narrative

There is some truth to the heroic meta-narrative, but it is also incomplete, misleading, and in some ways untrue. It obscures important political and cultural aspects of the public work of land-grant colleges of agriculture. It is untrue to the extent to which it claims or implies that the work of "democratizing" knowledge has nearly always benefited—in relatively equal measure—the common people, the states, and the nation, most notably through steady progress in improving agricultural efficiency.

As state institutions that receive considerable public funding, land-grant colleges of agriculture have indeed played key roles in raising agricultural productivity through their contributions to the process of modernizing and industrializing agriculture. However, the state-supported process of modernization did not benefit everyone equally. It involved what historian Daniel T. Rodgers has called "a classic marriage of economic efficiency and unpaid social costs: cheap food at the expense of education, health, and ambition among its myriad small producers" (and, we might add, at the expense of the environment). Rather than a success story of steady progress, agricultural modernization in the United States and elsewhere can be viewed as a tragic story of technocratic colonization and environmental destruction. Interestingly, Liberty Hyde Bailey makes an appearance as a character

in this story, too. But this time he is cast as a villain rather than a hero. We see this in the following passage from James C. Scott's important book, *Seeing Like A State:*

> The unspoken logic behind most of the state projects of agricultural modernization was one of consolidating the power of central institutions and diminishing the autonomy of cultivators and their communities vis-à-vis those institutions… For colonized farmers, the effect of such centralization and expertise was a radical de-skilling of the cultivators themselves. Even in the context of family farms and a liberal economy, this was in fact the utopian prospect held up by Liberty Hyde Bailey . . .

Scott goes on to condemn Bailey for being an oppressive technocrat who promoted a future rural society "organized almost entirely by a managerial elite." [10]

Drawing on the work of Scott and many other scholars, a sketch of the tragic counter-narrative about land-grant colleges of agriculture would go something like this: In the late nineteenth-century, farmers' economic and material interests were not being met. This was not solely because of their supposed inability to understand and solve the technical problems they faced. It was also because of the unjust effects of political and cultural policies, structures, powers, and trends. In this story, scientific experts came on the scene not as heroes who advanced farmers' interests, but rather as villains who forced the modernization of agriculture in order to fuel the industrial economy with "cheap food." That was their main "public" purpose. They sought to change farmers and other rural citizens in ways that (intentionally or not) privileged elite urban industrial interests over those of rural communities. While some farmers resisted, they ultimately lost or gave up. Behaviors, methods, and views were changed, and agricultural productivity was improved to support a national "cheap food" policy, which benefited some, but not all, at least in the short term. In the long term, however, farmers, rural communities, the environment, consumers, and the nation as a whole were all worse off.[11]

Instead of the heroic meta-narrative's ascending plotline of

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improvement, the tragic counter-narrative has a descending plotline of economic, political, cultural, and environmental loss. In this counter-narrative, most farmers play roles as futile resistors or hapless victims, while land-grant faculty are cast as technocratic experts, colonizers, and oppressors. This is not a story of the "democratization" of higher learning, but rather its opposite.

The Prophetic Counter-Narrative

There is more than a little truth to the tragic counter-narrative. But like the heroic meta-narrative, in some ways it is misleading. To the extent that it casts the story of the public mission of these colleges as being almost wholly negative, it is also wrong.

In my research, I have begun to reconstruct a second counter-narrative about the public purposes and work of land-grant colleges of agriculture. It is a prophetic counter-narrative about the interrelated struggles for freedom and sustainability. One of the most important historical figures in this counter-narrative is none other than Liberty Hyde Bailey.

In the late 1890s, Bailey began to write about the need to pursue what he referred to as a "self-sustaining" agriculture. Building on the philosophy of a long line of nineteenth-century agricultural "improvers" who were committed to what historian Stephen Stoll has referred to as an "ethic of permanence," Bailey viewed the pursuit of a "self-sustaining" agriculture as a multi-dimensional project that had technical, scientific, moral, economic, cultural, political, and even spiritual dimensions. According to him, this project would both require and result in the development of a new rural civilization "worthy of the best American ideals." Such a civilization would, in his mind, not only be worthy of the "American" ideal of material well-being for all. It would also be worthy of the democratic ideal (and practice) of self-rule, through which the common people, functioning as citizens, work as cooperative producers not only of the commonwealth, but also of the culture and politics of their own neighborhoods and communities.[12]

While Bailey rejected the idea that a new rural civilization could or should be imposed from above by land-grant

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colleges of agriculture, he prophesied that these colleges would be the primary means for catalyzing the development of this kind of social world. "We are now beginning to be consciously concerned in the development of a thoroughly good and sound rural civilization," he announced in 1909. "The colleges of agriculture will be the most important agencies in this evolution." [13]

In Bailey's view, the aims of land-grant colleges of agriculture were not to be narrowly technical and economic, but broadly cultural and political. In an address given at the dedication of the new buildings for the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell in 1907, Bailey argued that land-grant colleges of agriculture "contribute to the public welfare in a very broad way, extending their influence far beyond the technique of agricultural trades." Elaborating on this theme in 1909, he proclaimed:

> While the College of Agriculture is concerned directly with increasing the producing power of land, its activities cannot be limited narrowly to this field. It must stand broadly for rural civilization. It must include within its activities such a range of subjects as will enable it to develop an entire philosophy or scheme of country life. All civilization develops out of industries and occupations; and so it comes that agriculture is properly a civilization rather than a congeries of crafts. The colleges of agriculture represent this civilization, in its material, business and human relations. Therefore, they are not class institutions, representing merely trades and occupations. The task before the colleges of agriculture is nothing less than to direct and to aid in developing the entire rural civilization; and this task places them within the realm of statesmanship.[14]

It is possible to interpret this passage as being consistent with James C. Scott's allegation that Bailey was a scheming technocrat who wanted land-grant colleges of agriculture to engineer a new rural civilization from above. But Bailey was not a technocrat. He had strong democratic populist inclinations. He viewed the educational and scientific work of land-grant colleges as resources not only

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for the development of a "self-sustaining" agriculture, but also for the fulfillment of the common people's historical struggle for liberty. He once proclaimed that the Land-Grant Act of 1862 was "the most important single specific enactment ever made in the interest of education." This was so, he declared, because it represented the "final emancipation from formal, traditional, and aristocratic ideas." He wrote:

> Education was once exclusive; it is now in spirit inclusive. The agencies that have brought about this change of attitude are those associated with so-called industrial education, growing chiefly out of the forces set in motion by the Land-Grant Act of 1862. This Land-Grant is the Magna Charta of education: from it in this country we shall date our liberties.[15]

In "The Democratic Basis in Agriculture," a section of his most important book, *The Holy Earth* (1915), Bailey positioned the story of land-grant colleges of agriculture within the larger story of the struggle for freedom and agency. He assumed a sweeping historical perspective on the human quest for liberty, his prose suffused with the high rhetoric of the era, full of parallelism and iteration:

> For years without number, for years that run into the centuries when men have slaughtered each other on many fields, thinking that they were on the fields of honor, when many awful despotisms have ground men into the dust, the despotisms thinking themselves divine—for all these years there have been men [sic] on the land wishing to see the light, trying to make mankind hear, hoping but never realizing. They have been the pawns on the great battlefields, men taken out of the peasantries to be hurled against other men they did not know and for no rewards except further enslavement. They may even have been developed to a high degree of manual or technical skill that they might better support governments to make conquests. They have been on the bottom, upholding the whole superstructure and pressed into the earth by the weight of it.[16]

In Bailey's view, the nineteenth century had brought a

"parting of the ways" in the United States that foretold the end of this terrible history of oppression. Farmers and others "at the bottom" began to receive recognition not only for the economic value of their work, but also—and according to Bailey most importantly—for their humanity and dignity and their standing as citizens. In his view, this multi-dimensional recognition was what inspired the creation of the United States Department of Agriculture, land-grant colleges, agricultural experiment stations, and, finally, a national cooperative extension system. "A new agency has been created in the agricultural extension act which was signed by President Wilson on the 8th of May in 1914," Bailey wrote of the passage of the Smith-Lever Act that established the extension system, using the language of historic forces and transformations. "A new instrumentality in the world has now received the sanction of a whole people . . . and it almost staggers one when one even partly comprehends the tremendous consequences that in all likelihood will come of it." Conceptualizing extension work in political rather than narrowly technical terms, he pointed to the problem of relating

> all this public work to the development of a democracy. I am not thinking so much of the development of a form of government as of a real democratic expression on the part of the people. Agriculture is our basic industry. As we organize its affairs, so to a great degree shall we secure the results in society in general.[17]

In Bailey's view, higher education's engagement with farmers needed to take the form of a democratic association that is deeply educative. For him, it was imperative that "education should…function politically." With respect to the kind of education that should be provided by land-grant colleges of agriculture, he wrote:

> It is not sufficient to train technically in the trades and crafts and arts to the end of securing greater economic efficiency—this may be accomplished in a despotism and result in no self-action on the part of the people. Every democracy must reach far beyond what is commonly known as economic efficiency, and do everything it can to enable those

The prophetic counter-narrative tells the story of a collaborative, rather than oppressive, relationship between university and community.

> in the backgrounds to maintain their standing and their pride and to partake in the making of political affairs.[18]

Bailey's broad, highly ambitious, and inherently political vision of the public work of land-grant colleges was not a momentary anomaly that no one else shared. It was embraced by many people and was incorporated into the rhetoric and culture of the national Cooperative Extension System during the first few decades of its existence. This can be seen in the opening paragraph of a book published in 1930 entitled *The Agricultural Extension System*, authored by two national extension leaders:

> There is a new leaven at work in rural America. It is stimulating to better endeavor in farming and home making, bringing rural people together in groups for social intercourse and study, solving community and neighborhood problems, fostering better relations and common endeavor between town and country, bringing recreation, debate, pageantry, the drama and art into the rural community, developing cooperation and enriching the life and broadening the vision of rural men and women. This new leaven is the cooperative extension work of the state agricultural colleges and the federal Department of Agriculture, which is being carried on in cooperation with the counties and rural people throughout the United States.[19]

This remarkable paragraph provides a tantalizing glimpse of the prophetic counter-narrative, which tells the story of a collaborative, rather than oppressive, relationship between university and community. Like the heroic meta-narrative, this story has an ascending plotline. But unlike it, the prophetic counter-narrative is about the difficult struggles for freedom and sustainability, rather than simply economic gain. It reflects an embrace of the task that Liberty Hyde Bailey assigned to land-grant colleges of agriculture in 1909: "to direct and to aid in developing the entire rural civilization." As he put it, such a task placed these colleges "within the realm of statesmanship." In other words, it placed them within the realm of *politics*. But it also placed them within the realm of *culture*, espe-

cially, but not only, through its engagement in what Smith and Wilson referred to as "the drama and art."

A book published in 1922, titled *The Little Country Theater*, provides a window onto the story of why and how "the drama and art" were incorporated into the public purposes of land-grant colleges of agriculture. Authored by Alfred Arvold, the book reflects a populist faith in the latent talents, spirit, and vision of the common country people of North Dakota, and in the power of the theater to tap and unleash these qualities. Using the diminutive "little" to stake out a cultural agenda that would defy the condescension of provincialism, and using plain prose brimming with enthusiasm, Arvold wrote of how and why he founded a theater for country people in 1914 at what was then called the North Dakota Agricultural College. Quoting their own words from their many grateful letters to him, he celebrated what the theater meant to the imaginative people of the state:

> There are literally millions of people in country communities today whose abilities along various lines have been hidden, simply because they have never had an opportunity to give expression to their talents. In many respects this lack of self-expression has been due to the narrow-minded attitude of society toward those who till the soil, and the absence of those forces which seek to arouse the creative instincts and stimulate that imagination and initiative in country people which mean leadership.[20]

Arvold tried to develop this leadership in and through his Little Country Theater by encouraging rural people to write, produce, and perform plays in their own communities. The Little Country Theater was devoted, as Arvold put it, to helping rural people "find themselves," and in so doing (echoing Bailey's faith in the primordial logic of democracy), "discover the hidden life forces of nature itself." It had an important public purpose, captured in a quote by Victor Hugo that Arvold chose as his epigraph: "The theater is a crucible of civilization. It is a place of human communion. It is in the theater that the public soul is formed." [21]

According to the heroic meta-narrative, the government-supported work of improving agriculture is and should be mainly aimed at enhancing productivity and efficiency. But in the prophetic counter-narrative, "improvement" is understood much more broadly. As Arvold wrote in a North Dakota Extension Service Circular published in 1940, "To humanize agriculture should be one of the noblest aims of any government." In his view, place-making was key to the process of humanization. Speaking to the people of North Dakota and echoing Bailey's trope of the "holy earth," he proclaimed:

> The place in which you live is holy ground… it is the most neglected real estate in the world. Just as every community has certain natural resources which are often hidden, so does it have people with talents, which if expressed would revolutionize the spirit of the country-side.[22]

When he founded his theater in 1914, seventy percent of the population of North Dakota lived in unincorporated territory. Seven out of every eight persons were classed as rural. It was a remarkably diverse immigrant and native-born population, composed of American Indians, Norwegians, Danes, Swedes, Icelanders, English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, Greeks, Italians, Turks, Russians, Germans, and others. In his book on the Little Country Theater, omitting Native Americans from his history, Arvold aligned himself with a manifest destiny of world cultures rejuvenated on the frontiers, not just as a force of nature, but as a "great American ideal and force":

> All these people came originally from countries whose civilizations are much older than our own. All have inherited a poetry, a drama, an art, a life in their previous national existence, which, if brought to light through the medium of some great American ideal and force, would give to the state and the country a rural civilization such as has never been heard of in the history of the world.[23]

Many women and men in the land-grant system shared Arvold's expansionist ideas and democratic ideals. During the 1920s and 30s, they established what Marjorie Patten called the "arts workshop of rural America." In her 1937

book by that title, Patten tells the story of the origins and development of this little-known chapter in land-grant history. In the concluding chapter of her book, she quotes Eduard Lindeman, the pioneering philosopher of the American adult education movement: "Adult education must show that each individual can fulfill his [sic] own personality only as he finds his place in relation to the common good." [24]

"It is on the basis of such a philosophy," Patten proclaimed, "that the rural drama, music, and folk events and the cultivation of the fine arts have been included in the Agricultural Extension program." In concluding, she wrote:

> …if those arts which grow under our hands add beauty to our surroundings and give soul satisfaction in the accomplishment of artistic ideals, then let there be in the field more artists free to help the rural people create more, dream more, live more—and so become equal to the task ahead of building the kind of rural America the farmers of the future will be glad to call their own.[25]

Patten's view of the artist as a source of "help," and thus as an enlightened outsider, reflects the doubts about the aesthetic and intellectual capacities of rural people that recur in discourse about both education and the arts. Nonetheless, her book portrays rural people as cultural producers rather than just consumers. It firmly links the arts to the "common good" and imagination to social agency. It also firmly and unapologetically situates the arts as an essential and integral component of the public purposes and work of land-grant colleges of agriculture.

Changing the Story

While the details of the three narratives I have just sketched are specific to land-grant colleges of agriculture, their essential nature and shape are not. Every institution in American higher education has its own heroic metanarrative, as well as its own tragic and prophetic counternarratives. Which of these is told and which is not carries profound implications.

By changing the story of the public work of land-grant colleges of agriculture into a struggle for freedom and sustainability, the prophetic counter-narrative helps us to see yet another set of truths.

The meta-narrative of improvement and progress does capture some important truths about the story of the public purposes and work of land-grant colleges of agriculture. But it is also deeply problematic. It is much too self-congratulatory and narrow, reducing the meaning of higher education's public purposes to economics. It positions academic professionals as neutral technicians, and citizens as passive and needy clients. By changing the heroic narrative into a narrative of oppression, the tragic counter-narrative helps us to see a different set of truths. But this counter-narrative renders the significance of higher education's public mission as entirely negative. It positions academic professionals as technocratic oppressors, and citizens as victims. In doing so, it tends to generate more cynicism than hope and action.

By changing the story of the public work of land-grant colleges of agriculture into a struggle for freedom and sustainability, the prophetic counter-narrative helps us to see yet another set of truths. It helps us to appreciate positive political and cultural dimensions of higher education that are obscured by the other two narratives. But the prophetic counter-narrative poses its own difficulties. If it is cast in an uncritical and overly romantic and nostalgic way, it can slight the importance of economic and material ends, the value of technical expertise and instrumental learning, the workings of power, and the harsh realities of racism, sexism, and classism.

Despite the potential limits of, and problems with, the prophetic counter-narrative, I think it is the one we most urgently need to learn and tell, particularly in the context of the accelerating commercialization that threatens to transform higher education into something that serves only private ends. Of course, we need to tell the tragic counter-narrative, too. The tragic counter-narrative of the land-grant system that scholars in the fields of agricultural history and higher education studies have constructed is an expression of one of the most important public purposes scholars pursue as social critics: that is, the purpose of protecting against tyranny. But criticism is not enough. Without the positive conception of liberty that lies at the core of the prophetic counter-narrative, I fear that we will not be able to stir the kind of imagination, energy, courage, and creativity we need to deepen the academy's construc-

What is at stake is nothing less than how we understand the civic nature and significance of higher education and the academic profession.

tive engagement in the historical struggles for freedom and sustainability. For these struggles, we need a kind of engagement that calls on and enables scholars to be *public* scholars: that is, scholars who are more than responsive experts and detached social critics, but also proactive educators, citizens, and cultural workers who participate in and sometimes even organize public work.[26]

It is important that we not miss what is at stake here. In my view, what is at stake is nothing less than how we understand the civic nature and significance of higher education and the academic profession. On this matter, the dominant trend over the past half-century has not been encouraging. As historian Thomas Bender has argued, the transformation of academic culture after World War II featured a narrowing and weakening of the informal compact between the university and society, and the triumph of an inward-looking disciplinary professionalism. As a result, both higher education and the academic profession are now understood by far too many people to be about little more than the development of technical knowledge, expertise, and innovation that serves an academic mission of disciplinary development, and a public mission of economic development. This shift reflects not only the triumph of a heroic meta-narrative, but also the loss of a prophetic counter-narrative.[27]

So what of the future? Is there any hope? I think so. Imagining America, Campus Compact, the national Outreach Scholarship conferences, and the work of many individuals and groups across the nation reveal the stirrings of a movement to rethink and renegotiate the compact between the university and society in ways that include, but also go well beyond, economic development. For the academic profession, this emerging movement signals the renewal of what William Sullivan refers to as the "intrinsic purposes of the professional enterprise." According to Sullivan, these purposes are expressed through a pledge professionals have historically made to "deploy their technical expertise and judgment not only skillfully but for public-regarding ends and in a public-regarding way." But a conception of professionalism that stresses public ends and practices (Sullivan calls such a conception "civic professionalism") is not widely embraced or even known.

We must take up the task of changing both the conversation and the story about higher education's public purposes and work.

Given this problem, Sullivan writes, it is "far from clear" whether professionals in a variety of fields, including the academy, "will be able to sustain their social importance without re-engaging the public over the value of their work to the society at large." If the "professional enterprise" is to have a future, he suggests, professionals "may need to rest their case on the basis of a civic rather than a wholly technical understanding of what it is that [they] are about." [28]

In order for us to make a compelling case for a broadly civic, rather than a narrowly technical and economic understanding of what academic professionals and institutions are about, we must take up the task of changing both the conversation and the story about higher education's public purposes and work. We need to instigate many new conversations on this theme: some that are localized within our respective states, communities, institutions, and disciplines, and others that cut across these bounded arenas. These new conversations can serve as opportunities for learning, deliberation, and critical reflection. To make them so, we must approach them in historically informed and situated ways that enable us to be mindful of threatening, as well as enabling, trends. We must conduct them in ways that embody high standards of evidence and of conceptual and theoretical coherence. We must seed them with unscripted stories of civic practice and experience. And we must take the time to think together about the meanings and implications of such stories by placing them within the ongoing (counter) narrative of the historical struggles for freedom and sustainability.

As I have sought to undertake this within my own college during the past few years, I have been deeply impressed by the political and cultural depth, richness, and complexity of the stories my colleagues have to tell about their public work, particularly those colleagues who work in highly technical disciplines in the natural sciences. Given the bland technical face that land-grant colleges of agriculture often present to the world, this has been both a surprising and an encouraging discovery. But I have also been struck by something else - by telling their stories, my colleagues are breaking a long-standing silence about the public dimensions of their work. Virtually all of them have told me that they have never been asked to speak of these dimensions in depth, nor have they had a sustained

We must help each other to imagine new answers to the question of what it looks like and what it means for scholars to "deploy their technical expertise and judgement not only skillfully, but for public-regarding ends and in a public-regarding way."

opportunity to reflect on them in serious and critical ways. This is sobering and disappointing, particularly when one considers the land-grant system's reputation as an exemplar of the so-called "service ideal" in American higher education.

I want to end with a note of hope and possibility rather than disappointment. Though sustained collective reflection about the public dimension of academic work appears to have been rare in the land-grant system, the faculty members I have worked with respond with great enthusiasm when offered this opportunity. One of the most important reasons why they do so, I think, is because they are invited to tell and make meaning of their public engagement *stories*, rather than simply to report their "outreach" activities, recite their complaints, or voice their theories and opinions.

Here is what all this adds up to: Using the cultural strategies of narrative, the thickly contextual and often idiosyncratic languages of story, we must help each other to imagine new answers to the question of what it looks like and what it means for scholars to "deploy their technical expertise and judgment not only skillfully but for public-regarding ends and in a public-regarding way." Our willingness and ability to take up this challenge may well determine the future of the academy as a public institution.

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"The tragic counter-narrative of the land-grant system that scholars in the fields of agricultural history and higher education studies have constructed is an expression of one of the most important public purposes scholars pursue as social critics: that is, the purpose of protecting against tyranny. But criticism is not enough. Without the positive conception of liberty that lies at the core of the prophetic counter-narrative, I fear that we will not be able to stir the kind of imagination, energy, courage, and creativity we need to deepen the academy's constructive engagement in the historical struggles for freedom and sustainability."

In this essay, originally given as the keynote address for the joint Imagining America/Outreach Scholarship conference in 2006, Scott Peters examines the stories we tell about the history of higher education. He uses the strategies of the humanities and the qualitative social sciences to illuminate competing accounts of the public mission of American land-grant colleges. Specifically, he uncovers the historical relationship between culture and agriculture, building a bridge from Imagining America's usual arena of the arts, humanities, and design to quite different kinds of work that are equally concerned with the layered meanings of place.

Peters tracks the ways in which the relationships between universities and rural communities have been represented and justified, usually by academics themselves. He then uses these narratives to chart the tensions between the economic and democratic purposes of U.S. campuses between 1880 and 1930, tensions that bedevil us in new ways now. His essay shows how the public mission of our colleges and universities has been—and is still being—negotiated through much-debated heroic, tragic, and prophetic meta-narratives. And as a leader of the movement for community engagement, he models precisely the kind of critical self-reflection and "public-regarding" practice that he finds in the work of his own colleagues. Speaking directly to the producers of knowledge and culture who aim to become civic professionals, he offers a pragmatic strategy for hope.

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