

ACP/IA Action Research Initiative

REBUILDING DEMOCRACY'S COLLEGE

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The Idea

The historian Earl D. Ross gave his study of the origins and early development of the land-grant system a bold title. He called it *Democracy's College*. In the book's concluding paragraph, he summarized his view of what land-grant institutions faced and accomplished during their formative years:

... the real test of all the land-grant institutions was their ability and disposition to fulfill their peculiar mission in the new era, and it was in ministering to the technical, social, and political needs of the nation come of age that they attained measurably to the vision of the true prophets of the industrial movement in becoming real people's colleges—with all their limitations a distinct native product and the fullest expression of democracy in higher education.¹

We'll be marking the sesquicentennial in 2012 of the first of several federal acts that established the land-grant system, the Morrill Act of 1862. In relation to this historical moment, we propose an action research initiative that will weave together three distinct lines of inquiry:

- A critical examination of the history of the aspirational ideal of “real people's colleges,” or democracy colleges, not only in the land-grant system, but also in other sectors of American higher education.
- A reshaping and recasting of the theory, philosophy, and practices of the democracy's college ideal in and for a new era, engaging and drawing from the “vision of the true prophets” of the contemporary engagement movement.
- An identification and assessment of key lessons about the work of rebuilding—or building anew—democracy colleges in the 21st century, drawn from the analysis of oral histories and case studies from different institutional types, and the development and testing of a practical theory of relational organizing capable of catalyzing and advancing cultural change in institutions of higher education.

We propose to pursue these lines of inquiry with teams of participants from 6-8 institutions, strategically chosen to represent some of the best civic work that is now underway in many different sectors of American higher education. In recruiting teams, we'll look for potential candidates among community colleges, private liberal arts colleges,

¹ Earle D. Ross, *Democracy's College: The Land-Grant Movement in the Formative Stage* (Ames, IA: The Iowa State College Press, 1942), pp. 181-182.

state colleges and universities, tribal colleges, historically black institutions, Hispanic serving institutions, faith-based institutions, for profit institutions, and large research universities. We'll recruit an overall project team that we'll convene for face-to-face meetings at the Kettering Foundation twice a year for three years. And we'll work in close partnership with leadership from the American Commonwealth Partnership and Imagining America as we develop and pursue the initiative.

We don't want to predefine the exact nature and scope of the democracy's college ideal before we engage in this research. But we do want to make it clear as we begin that we embrace an expansive view of the ideal, one that includes not only a commitment to access and affordability and the provision of a liberal education, but also to robust and diverse forms of off-campus public engagement. In other words, one that includes not only a commitment to "the fullest expression of democracy in higher education," as Ross put it, but also to the fullest expression of *higher education in democracy*. In both of these senses, our vision of democracy colleges is grounded in a commitment to the ethic of full participation, animated by the aim of improving higher education's roles in and contributions to the work of strengthening civic agency across our society.

Initial Implementation

To implement this initiative, we propose the following steps:

- By the end of the summer of 2012, strategically recruit a project leadership team drawn from a diverse range of institutional types.
- By October of 2012, develop a short concept paper for the initiative, co-authored by the leadership team, and shared and reviewed at the Imagining America conference in NYC.
- By the end of October of 2012, secure support from the Kettering Foundation in the form of a three-year learning agreement.
- By the end of December of 2012, recruit participant teams from 6-8 institutions.
- By the end of February of 2013, hold the first project meeting at the Kettering Foundation.

Products

As an action research initiative, the learning generated through the process we'll undertake in this inquiry will be as or even more important than specific tangible products that may come out of it. Nonetheless, we do envision one key product: the publication of a book provisionally entitled *Rebuilding Democracy's College*. The book will document and communicate the findings of the three lines of inquiry identified above. We expect to generate a range of other products through this initiative as well, including practitioner profiles and oral histories, academic papers, a web site, and video documentaries.