

An Ethical Call for Higher Education

This weekend, The OpEd Project directed a Public Voices Fellowship at Yale University, in which a room of 19 scholars got to grapple with the invitation to become “thought leaders” and make their voices heard in major media outlets. As a postgraduate associate this year at Yale Women Faculty Forum, I helped to coordinate the event and had the privilege of observing the two-day convening. I looked around the room amazed by their bios, dreaming up what these scholars could create over the course of the year and how their work could benefit larger audiences.

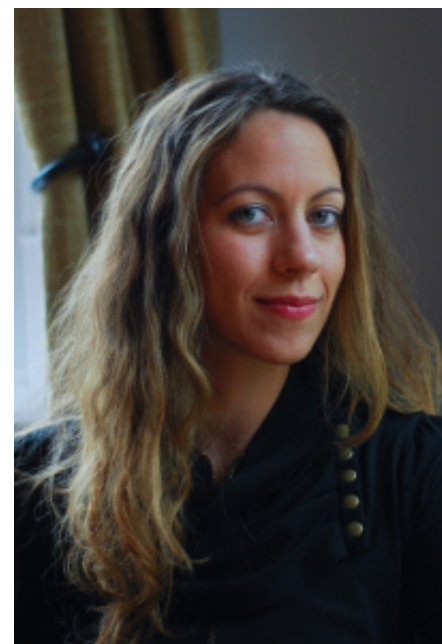
(<http://theopedproject.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/kimberly-51.jpg>)

The types of questions raised by group facilitators Courtney Martin and Zeba Khan, as well as the Yale scholars, about the value and responsibility of participating in public discourse more broadly could not have come at a better time for me. As a young academic, I wrestle, seemingly every day, with a set of ethical questions about what it means to have such a privileged access to the rich resources of higher education.

For while I have deeply appreciated my time at a place like Yale and am committed to a life of scholarship and teaching, I am also simultaneously concerned by the ways in which the US academy as a whole often does not demonstrate an urgency to contribute its intellectual resources in an accessible way to the larger public conversation.

But the kind of work The OpEd Project is doing with its Public Voices Fellowships at universities gives me hope that change is indeed on its way—change that is greatly needed in this historical moment. For instance, in my own field of women’s studies, it seems there has never been a better time, with the existing political climate as it is, for feminist scholars to engage and help educate a larger public.

However, there are certain existing expectations in the academy that can limit scholars’ involvement in larger conversations. For one, as we discussed at our convening, we academics tend to have a specific—and limited—definition of that which constitutes “production” and that which constitutes “knowledge.” It is usually only academic books, by academic presses, which are read by a small group of fellow academics, which are counted as “production” worthy of measure in our current



credentialing system. To actively participate in more widespread public discussion prior to tenure—such as writing op-eds or otherwise participating in thought leadership— might set one up to be read as not giving enough time to “scholarship.”

In other words, to participate more broadly in democracy and to make one’s ideas accessible can be a liability in certain academic spaces.

From my vantage point as a young academic, I believe we’ve got to change this value system. In fact, I would argue that the very life of our democratic process in the US depends on changing this system. I am thankful that The OpEd Project, in collaboration with its participating scholars and the administrators and universities supporting those scholars, is part of the innovation so urgently needed.

One of my favorite moments of the two-day convening was when Yale Professor Kamari Clarke explained that this pervasive idea that scholars by and large don’t participate in the larger public conversation is really an assumption limited to the US context, and is not a universal reality by any means.

To echo the words of Courtney Martin in that moment, “I wanted to jump out of my seat” as I heard Professor Clarke talk about the importance of pioneering needed changes in the US academy, in which scholars are given the tools and encouragement to be “thought leaders” in a larger sense than just academic spaces.

It meant the world to me to hear people I admire, farther along in their careers, speak to these changes, and name this ethical call that I believe should be at the heart of higher education. That The OpEd Project’s Public Voices Fellowship provided a space for that kind of vision-casting at my university left me exceedingly grateful.

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