

Albert W. Dzur. *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.

Democratic Professionalism

Review by Janet S. Ayres

Faculty engaged in higher education outreach and engagement will find Albert Dzur's new book, *Democratic Professionalism*, thought-provoking—both in terms of how individual faculty members view their work as professionals and how the university gives credence to engagement. Although Dzur does not specifically address the role of faculty or the university in engagement work, he proposes a perspective on the role of professionals and their institutions in enhancing American democracy that will resonate with outreach faculty.

The role of intellectuals in American democracy has been a topic of debate since the founding of our country. During the Progressive Era, John Dewey and other intellectuals recognized the importance of those with specialized knowledge as “uniquely capable of solving social problems and making difficult policy choices in the best interests of the public.” Now, when the public's trust of professionals, civil servants, and public institutions is seemingly at an all-time low, Albert Dzur brings forth a compelling approach to enhance, even transform, how professionals “engage” with the public.

The central focus of this well-researched book is a newly defined role for contemporary professionals in the American democracy: facilitating involvement of the public in addressing significant social issues, a concept he calls *democratic professionalism*. Dr. Dzur's perspective is that professionals, while still valuing the specialized knowledge of their profession, can be more democratic by working collaboratively *with* lay people, enabling them to deliberate and make decisions on issues that affect them. Through such discourse, mutual trust is built between professionals and lay people, and public skills of deliberation are enhanced. Dzur builds a compelling argument for this new form of professionalism through sociological and political theories and critiques. He illustrates a “reform movement” of democratic professionals in three politically significant domains—public journalism, restorative justice, and bioethics.

Public deliberation is the political framework for Dzur's work. Public discussion and debate have long been recognized as characteristics of a democracy. The concept of deliberation, however, is newer, having come to the forefront of democratic theory in the 1990s. Broadly defined, public deliberation is the discussion of public issues by members of the public who are enabled to voice their diverse views, interests, and *values*, with values considered as important as interests. Through such discourse, citizens influence one another as they struggle with complex issues, ultimately affecting collective public decision making. Dzur contends that professionals have largely been left out of both the study and practice of public deliberation. He builds an argument that professionals are the "missing agents of democratic thought" in that they have a critical role to play in bridging the lay public with public issues.

Dzur builds his approach to democratic professionalism through a rich theoretical discussion of the study of professionalism using perspectives drawn from sociology and political science. He builds on Dewey's work to further define a "social trustee model" of professionalism as having an area of knowledge or specialized training, control over one's work, self-regulation, and some level of social responsibility. During the 1960s, in response to the social complexity and modernization of American society, a different theoretical perspective arose, one that Dzur calls the "radical critique" of professionalism. This approach views professionals as "technocrats, disabling experts, and task monopolists" who manipulate public issues from behind the scenes and impede citizen participation. According to this perspective, unelected experts such as policy analysts, strategic planners, and economic and political advisors are brought into the public arena by decision makers requesting their expertise on complex issues, institutions, and processes. They gradually take over public issue discussions and decision making, thereby excluding the lay public from these processes. Dzur critiques both Dewey and the radical perspective and draws upon key concepts relevant to contemporary society to formulate his democratic professionalism approach.

Democratic professionals are "bridge agents" who connect the institutions in which they work with the lay public to deliberate important social issues. Dzur expands upon the concept of "middle democracy" as "the ground-level network of lay participation" between institutions and individuals. Professionals act as key players to create opportunities for citizen participation and to facilitate public deliberation in public issues. The examples that Dzur provides include several instances of journalists creating

public forums to identify and debate important community issues; a local justice system that enabled citizens to determine the restitution to the victim and community for minor offenses; and bioethics as a democratic movement that is bringing important social interests and values into the medical profession. Professionals in these stories went beyond their professional duties of reporting the news or determining the community sentence. They created space for citizens to participate in issues important to them, to express their views and values, and to undertake tasks traditionally carried out only by professionals. Democratic professionals shared their tasks and their authority while still fulfilling their duties and applying their expertise. While espousing an ideal of democratic professionalism, Dzur discusses the practical aspects of involving the public. It takes time, energy, and other resources to reach out to the public, set up ways to communicate and exchange information, and organize forums. Professionals may not know how to undertake such democratic processes and may not have institutional support to do so.

Dzur concludes by discussing the ethical crisis in American professions and the critical role the university can play in addressing this problem. University faculty serve as “gatekeepers to professions, sources of professional knowledge, standard bearers of technique, and role models of professional ethics.” He notes the limitations of current ethics training in both undergraduate and graduate education and suggests appropriate curricular reforms. Additionally, he suggests that the university play a role in offering midcareer workshops to teach ethics and democratic processes.

While the university plays an important role in teaching and modeling professional ethics, it plays a far broader societal role through extension and engagement. Dzur does not address these components of the university. Dzur’s work raised several questions in my mind regarding the role of faculty and the institution in today’s democracy. Are engagement faculty democratic professionals? What does this work look like? What does this type of work mean within the institution? How does the university view its role in a democracy? Given the competitiveness among universities, what are the trade-offs between being a top research institution and doing engagement work, assuming that engagement fosters deliberative democracy? As faculty are increasingly expected to secure large research grants, how do they manage resources, especially time, to be more collaborative with the public? Do faculty know how to involve the public in genuine, not merely token, ways? How do faculty remain authentic to their profession and its

expectations while sharing tasks and authority with the public? How does the institution recognize and reward faculty for collaborative work with the public? How can faculty and the university foster more democratic, transformative work with the public and public institutions? Given the current public distrust of institutions and declining public support for universities, these are critical questions we, especially those of us in extension and/or engagement, should be asking. Perhaps this is a topic for public deliberation.

About the Reviewer

- Janet Ayres is professor and extension specialist in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University. Over her three decades of working in rural communities, she has developed many state- and regional-level programs to build the capacity of citizens to engage with their communities. Her current work is focused on leadership competencies to deal with controversial issues. She can be reached at ayres@purdue.edu.