

Saltmarsh, J., & Hartley, M. (Eds.). (2011). *To Serve a Larger Purpose: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Review by Timothy J. Shaffer

In February 2008, scholars convened at the Kettering Foundation to respond with “a sense of urgency” to the current state of higher education’s civic engagement work (p. 1). Higher education has, by the estimation of this volume’s editors, failed to fulfill Ernest Boyer’s call for it to serve a larger, democratic purpose. This volume contributes to that larger purpose by challenging those in higher education to view the last few decades as a foundation for building an academy that serves society, but not one sufficient for strengthening democracy. The re-envisioning of higher education’s civic mission has had to contend with the unclear goals and historical fragmentation of the engagement movement, as well as respond to challenges from a predominant ideology within the academy that stands in contrast to civic aims. In recent decades, civic engagement has become an important dimension of higher education’s social role, but often this work has been apolitical and rested “easily within the status quo and [has] rarely challenge[d] it” (p. 290).

This volume presents two central ideas. First, the United States faces significant social challenges, and higher education must play a role in responding to them. These challenges include the widening divide between rich and poor, the current economic crisis, and our inability to engage in meaningful dialogue about these and other issues. Second, the civic engagement movement has not yet realized its full potential. Work must be done to build on what has already occurred as well as draw in others to help articulate and effectuate engagement’s potential.

Efforts as part of the engagement movement have been broadly articulated and implemented—locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally—addressing diverse issues and audiences. Attempts to connect the various networks and initiatives have had limited success (p. 6). As engagement continues to develop and mature as a field of scholarship and as a movement, transforming colleges and universities into institutions committed to democracy and engagement into democratic work requires greater discussion about missions and purposes.

For Saltmarsh and Hartley and the contributors to this volume, the current manifestation of civic engagement is not enough. What is needed is democratic engagement: a “dynamic process rather than a static and rigid dogma or fixed set of activities” (p. 291). Viewed this way, engagement must transcend earlier expressions of service and embrace a modality based on democratic epistemology and practice. This democratic alternative has not been fully articulated, and this volume helps readers think through the challenges and opportunities associated with such change.

The editors introduce the purpose of the book by noting that the civic engagement movement (like all movements) has struggled to find “conceptual and operational coherence” (p. 14). What is not needed are simply more programs. In contrast, democratic processes and purposes reorient civic engagement to be “democratic engagement”—having epistemological, curricular, pedagogical, research, policy, and cultural implications. Without democratic purposes, engagement efforts are often ends in themselves, doing little more than providing good publicity for universities or colleges and providing services for communities. Additionally, engagement is often grounded in an institutional epistemology that privileges expertise and situates the university as the “center of solutions to public problems” (p. 19). Democratic engagement shifts the focus away from the university and instead positions it as part of an environment that values the knowledge and experience everyone contributes to education and community building. The editors stress the need for reciprocal relationships between universities and communities in which both parties acknowledge the political nature of engagement work being done with, rather than for, the public. Indeed, part of the desire for democratic engagement is that it stresses how universities are part of communities—“community” is not somehow “out there.”

The emergence of the civic engagement movement in the 1980s built on earlier traditions within higher education while also challenging many institutional norms. Hartley offers a historical look at the civic engagement movement by noting the contested purposes of higher education. For the last three decades, the civic engagement movement has struggled to define what it is and whether it challenges “value neutral” engagement or embraces it (p. 40). Various organizations and associations have sought to provide greater coherence to language and a way forward for democratic engagement, but have been hindered by the movement’s openness and lack of definitional barriers. Universities and colleges do “engagement” without defining what it is. Hartley notes that

without barriers, “a movement will offend few; however it risks inspiring no one” (p. 43). One of the goals of this volume is to collect distinct elements of the movement to articulate a model of engagement that is explicitly democratic, and one that catalyzes inspiration for students, faculty, and others to help cultivate and sustain our democratic society.

The rest of the chapters offer responses to the question: What are the responsibilities of colleges and universities in a democracy? These include chapters exploring the relationship between universities and community schools, the concept and practice of civic professionalism in the role of university leadership, deliberation’s role in higher education, faculty development, student-centered engagement, citizenship development, epistemological questions about engagement, and a critique of the idea that the civic engagement movement has plateaued.

This volume’s potency stems from the numerous voices and perspectives on the complex issues associated with higher education’s role in democracy, reflected in its chapters. Contributors are not only addressing theoretical issues; they are also doing the work they write about. According to the editors, there are two issues. First, the movement comprises “discrete efforts wholly disconnected from one another on campus—service-learning offices, diversity initiatives, global citizenship programs, difficult dialogue forums and so forth.” Such fragmentation, the editors argue, “will never produce transformative change” (p. 290). Because of these diverse and various strands of the movement, the proverbial left hand does not know what the right is doing.

Second, and equally important, civic engagement fails to challenge the status quo, in that it does not question core elements of how higher education functions. For this challenge, the book’s contributors make clear their belief that second-order changes are necessary if higher education is to make any meaningful impact on society. In their chapter on putting students at the center of civic engagement, Richard M. Battistoni and Nicholas V. Longo argue that “practitioners must reframe the way they think about and collaborate with their students in community-based work” (p. 199). This involves not only including students in conversations about the engaged academy, but also changing the way civic engagement is conceptualized, taught, and practiced. My own experience at universities has demonstrated the very real challenges institutions encounter when trying to articulate coherent views about engagement and how to discuss issues central to transforming higher education. This book could offer groups of faculty, administrators, and others a starting point for discussions about their own

institutions, and how they might transform their civic engagement to something more, something democratic. This volume offers an invitation to scholars and practitioners to think about the larger engagement movement by “lift[ing] up their heads from their various independent activities in order to see that there are many small tributaries that, together, could feed a movement capable of reshaping the landscape of American higher education” (p. 299).

The editors conclude by noting the need for a focus on building a strong, participatory democracy. Such a view details what is at the heart of democratic engagement: passion for democracy and a commitment to helping further develop higher education’s role in shaping society through reciprocal relationships with communities that value diverse experiences and knowledge. The democratically engaged university demands intellectual independence with a desire to make a difference in our democracy.

These articles offer numerous insights and reflections on how individuals and institutions have contributed to our democracy as co-creators of knowledge. However, they also embody the inherent difficulties of articulating a coherent and unified language for something that, at its zenith, is diverse and responsive. The struggle to define higher education’s role in democracy will continue. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

About the Reviewer

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