

Loss, C. (2012). *Between citizens and the state: The politics of American higher education in the 20th century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 344 pp.

Review by Timothy J. Shaffer

The role of higher education functioning as an intermediary between the federal government and citizens is one with a long history, reflecting many changes throughout the twentieth century. Christopher P. Loss's *Between Citizens and the State* traces this history, framing higher education's role as extending beyond what he calls the "rise of the professions and the growth of the federal-academic research matrix." He suggests, and rightly so, that too much of our understanding of the history of higher education has been wrapped up with "big science" and the "handful of elite institutions and experts that produced it" (p. 1). Contributing to a growing literature exploring the role of intermediary institutions in American society functioning as liaisons between the central government and a population preferring local or state control. Loss argues higher education has played a critical role mediating relations between the state and its citizens. Focusing attention on the "big three" federal higher education policies—the 1944 G.I. Bill, the 1958 National Defense Education Act, and the 1965 Higher Education Act—and other policy developments that bracketed those legislative moments, Loss approaches higher education history less as a march toward progress and more as a journey on a somewhat turbulent path. Because of this approach, the book does not read as a congratulatory celebration of higher education; rather, it provides a more honest assessment of the episodes in higher education history that have shaped and been shaped by the last century.

The book, which is very much a selective survey, is broken up into three parts: part 1, "Bureaucracy," looks at the development of higher education's growing institutionalism during the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s; part 2, "Democracy," explores how higher education and democratic citizenship became intertwined during the Second World War and during the ensuing Cold War period; and part 3, "Diversity," turns attention away from public-oriented issues such as the Federal Forum Project in which citizens came together to discuss public issues toward a more recent focus on students' private concerns and questions about what was occurring within universities rather than the role of universities in communities. Because of this shift, the three parts are loosely connected. The first two parts maintain a coherent thematic

development while the third part strains to maintain that trajectory as the discussion shifts to the rights of an increasingly diverse student population.

Still, the book holds to the theme of democratic citizenship as it was understood, articulated, and actualized during different periods, with Loss' central interest being an articulation of higher education's intermediary role. The chapters themselves are rich narratives, offering a historian's perspective and hindsight while also allowing the voices of the actors involved to speak for themselves without being overly interpreted. The stories are told less with statistics and instead rely more heavily on quotes.

Chapter 3, entitled "Building the New Deal Administrative State," is the chapter most explicitly focusing on topics relevant to outreach and engagement in higher education. This remains a largely forgotten period with respect to higher education's engagement with citizens and communities and its role in the development of democratic life. Loss notes that: "Although scholars have forgotten it today, higher education helped bridge the gap between citizens and the state during the 1930s (p. 53). Readers of the book will benefit from learning about American society before the Second World War in a time when citizens, especially rural men and women, were facing some of the most difficult times because of serious economic downturn dating back to the early 1920s, roughly a decade before the rest of America faced the devastation of the Great Depression. During this time of uncertainty, land-grant colleges responded to the needs of the federal government by utilizing the cooperative extension system to function as on-the-ground staff for the USDA's Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA).

As a complex story, Loss outlines the role land-grant colleges in the administration of the AAA and describes the tensions between a centralized bureaucratic approach to addressing public problems and a decentralized one like the utilization of the extension service, a trusted institution in rural communities. For many rural men and women, the idea of federal employees increasingly playing roles in their lives was anathema to their ethic of individualism and self-sufficiency. "Between 1933 and 1938," Loss writes, "county agents scoured the countryside on behalf of agricultural adjustment, changing farmers' relationship to the state" (p. 68). County agents worked with farmers to educate them about the importance of reducing production levels, but, importantly, these government employees were local community members, trusted because they were of the community.

Because of this positive relationship with extension, farmers were more willing to participate in the federal government's program to pay them to reduce their output. This raised the price of farm products and their livelihoods as farmers, but it also helped to stimulate the larger economy. By administering the AAA, extension shifted its energy away from purely education work to a more nuanced role with administrative responsibilities such as overseeing the numerous expectations and agreements of the AAA with regard to farm production and payments. This reconceptualization of extension's work was contested by some, a reality that would continue throughout the New Deal. While the utilization of extension by the USDA during this period forced extension to broaden the scope of its work with citizens, a more explicit attempt at engaging citizens in an educational environment was taking place through the Federal Forum Project.

John W. Studebaker, the Commissioner of Education, in the U.S. Office of Education, gained fame in the early 1930s with his Des Moines Forum Project, an initiative that positioned free and open public discussion at the heart of democracy. Studebaker (*p. 14*) asked, "What makes a democracy? Not government forms alone.... The spirit of the people, their ability to understand and their desire to grow in understanding, their willingness to perform the duties of citizenship—only these can give to governmental forms the vitality that is necessary for a successful democracy." Studebaker saw an opportunity for citizens to come together to discuss some of the most fundamental issues facing the country. Struggling to gain support at the national level for such a project, Studebaker was eventually able to get some funding to establish ten federal forum demonstration sites—in cities and counties from Portland, Oregon to Monongalia County, West Virginia—beginning in 1936. The project established Cooperative Forum Centers and Forum Counseling Programs in partnership with state universities and departments of education.

In many ways, it replicated the extension system through its use of educators in communities. But as Loss notes, the forum movement never achieved the status of a "training ground for national citizenship" as had been hoped. Nevertheless, it did encourage an estimated 2.5 million citizens who participated in one of the federal forum project's 23,000 discussion sessions between 1936 and 1941 to come to think of citizenship as more than voting (*p. 83*). The forum project "was eventually eclipsed by wartime exigencies and the availability of new mass communications. The coming television age offered a powerful alternative to the face-to-face give

and take of the forum model, irrevocably changing the manner in which most Americans received news and participated in democratic deliberation” (p. 85). Yet today, many academic professionals and educators replicate, somewhat unknowingly, this important initiative in the history of American higher education.

As rich as these examples detailed by Loss are, they are not inclusive of two other educational initiatives during this period that utilized group discussion and deliberation with the expressed purpose of helping “ordinary” citizens and academic professionals understand the increasingly complex economic, social, cultural, and political issues facing them. These USDA initiatives were known as discussion groups and Schools of Philosophy for Extension Workers. More than 3 million rural men and women participated in discussion groups and over 50,000 Extension workers and other rural community leaders attended Schools. The absence of these two initiatives serves as a reminder of the challenge of covering so many topics and times and the selective focus of the book.

Overall, the material included in this book is interesting and offers a fuller understanding of the relationship between citizens and government with higher education playing a vital role in the development of that relationship. Loss stated at the onset that he was attempting to fill a gap in the literature regarding this relationship by looking beyond the narrow scope of science and the research university. However, in his own way, Loss continues to narrowly tell the story of the role of higher education in fortifying democracy in the United States. He fails to mention anything about the cooperative extension system other than discussing the implementation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act during the New Deal. Extension serves as one of the largest and most enduring examples of higher education’s connection with the state in the project of nurturing citizenship, communities, and civic life, its relative neglect serves as a reminder of the selectivity of Loss’ book. Further reinforcing this sense of missing stories and lost historical richness and complexity, the concluding chapter focuses on themes from the 1970s and early 1980s, making the final pages feel like they move too quickly through the concluding decades of the century. The reader is left with the sense that the desire to write about the twentieth century as a whole led to its less than robust treatment.

Finally, Loss’ discussion in the first two parts of the book seems different than the final section on diversity and the “rights revolution.” There is a shift away from public problems being addressed through higher education’s social role to a discussion focused on the students and faculty within universities, showing the book’s

interest in the politics of American higher education rather than a sustained narrative about civic engagement. The work of higher education in the 1930s was about bringing citizens together to discuss public problems. During the Cold War, educational television emerged as a classroom without walls. Then, during the 1960s and later, students began questioning and challenging the status quo of higher education with the desire to transform the institution. This transition is intentional because, as Loss writes, “[The] reciprocal conception of educated citizenship endured until the 1960s, before being eclipsed by a rights-based citizenship model that did not require service to the state” (p. 215). But is this true? Such a shift seems somewhat artificial, especially considering publically engaged scholarship’s current role in shaping the public role and purpose of higher education. Loss could have made a less dramatic statement by acknowledging the various dimensions shaping higher education and its role in both providing opportunities for students while also working with the public through engagement.

At Cornell, Loss’ example of an elite institution struggling to respond to changing demographics, racial tensions played out with black students taking over an administration building because racism continued to shape their collegiate experience. Alongside the women’s studies movement and the emergence of ethnic studies programs, he concludes his study with an exploration of the “private marketplace of identity in an age of diversity.” While fascinating scholarship, one is left wondering about the impact of such shifts within higher education for the broader public. What did these students, now armed with a better understanding of racism, sexism, and classism, do with their knowledge? Loss mentions the Port Huron Statement and its authors, the Students for a Democratic Society, as well as its predecessor, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, but little was written about the continued development of the student movement and a desire to connect their education with political action and engagement. For example, where does the AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program fit into the narrative about the relationship between higher education and the state, decades after the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 established it? This service program, designed as a domestic Peace Corps, continues to rely heavily on recent college graduates to commit to a year of service in communities across the country. It is helpful to know the origins of such programs, but continuing the story about the ongoing development and work of the AmeriCorps VISTA program in fostering citizenship and civic life would have strengthened the book.

Loss offers his readers an opportunity to take a long view, narrating in his own way many elements of higher education's history that have not often been told. He provides a critical and illuminating look at the role of higher education in what he refers to as an intermediary institution between the federal government and citizens. Yet, the book struggles in this telling because of the enormity of the topic at hand. It seems the material could have been developed more thoroughly if he had chosen a more focused topic within the domain of higher education's role between citizens and state. Loss has provided, however, an important foundation for other scholars to explore more deeply often forgotten chapters of American history dealing with higher education's role in our democracy.

References

Studebaker, J. W.(1935). *The American way: Democracy at work in Des Moines forums*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

About the Reviewer

Timothy J. Shaffer, PhD is director of the Center for Leadership and Engagement and a faculty member at Wagner College. His research interests include historical and contemporary forms of engagement, civic professionalism, and the public philosophies that animate citizens. He earned his bachelor's degree in theology from St. Bonaventure University, master's degrees in public administration and theological studies from the University of Dayton, and a PhD in education for Cornell University.