

Hoy, A., & Johnson, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Deepening community engagement in higher education: Forging new pathways*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan (pp. 332)

### Review by Susan B. Harden

**A**s a professor of community engagement who regularly attends conferences about outreach and engagement in higher education, I have seen many impressive presentations about the Bonner Foundation. The outcomes of its programs are legendary. In 2009 at a North Carolina Campus Compact conference, I saw Wayne Meisel, founding president of the Bonner Foundation, speak passionately about the engagement work of the Bonner Scholars. In his presentation, Meisel doffed his loafers and jacket and paced around the tables of a large banquet room in stocking feet. He gave an hour-long, highly animated engagement altar call. I was completely taken with his unapologetic use of social justice language and spiritual imagery when he described the work of the Bonner Foundation. The impact of the workshop on me was such that the Bonner Scholar Program became a model for the Civic Minor in Urban Youth and Communities, an interdisciplinary undergraduate academic program we created at UNC Charlotte. This minor was designed to prepare students to “become informed and engaged citizens by providing opportunities to be agents of change in their community” (<http://catalog.uncc.edu/undergraduate-catalogs/current/COED/mdsk#minor-urban-youth-communities>).

My example of the impact of the Bonner Foundation is just a drop in a very large bucket. According to the Bonner Foundation website, during the past 23 years the organization has

awarded more than \$86 million in annual grants and another \$85 million in Bonner Program Endowment awards to 20 participating colleges and universities (which have a current market value of more than \$162 million). The Foundation has led a number of federally-funded higher education consortium grants, including:

- a) four Learn & Serve America grants (three for community-based research and one for social media),
- b) three FIPSE grants (including one to establish civic engagement certificates, concentrations or minors), and
- c) more than ten years of national and State AmeriCorps

grants (that support more than 1,000 members annually). (*Hackett, 2014 para. 2*)

Without a doubt, the Bonner Foundation provides a model of what *deep* community engagement looks like in higher education.

Fortunately for those of us who design community engagement programs, editors Ariane Hoy and Mathew Johnson pull back the curtain and provide readers with a front row seat on the magic of the Bonner programs in *Deepening Community Engagement in Higher Education: Forging New Pathways*. This volume of research findings, reflections, and lessons from 13 college- and university-based Bonner programs is a valuable resource for faculty, staff, and administrators. Although the articles are authored by individuals at Bonner-partnered institutions, many of the pieces could stand alone as unique and important works providing universal and easily applied contributions. Even the reader who is unfamiliar with Bonner will appreciate the insights of engaged scholarship and recommendations for engaged practice.

The 20 chapters are organized by themes according to engagement constituencies: students, partners, faculty, and centers. Two concluding sections of the book are dedicated to critical responses to the text. Wayne Meisel wrote the foreword and contributed a chapter in the “Student” section of the book titled “Engaging Faith: Spiritual Exploration as a Critical Component.” The foreword is a concise and powerful overview of the vision and guiding principles that have shaped the Bonner programs. Meisel describes the desire of Bertram and Corella Bonner to create a foundation dedicated to “helping the person who was hurting” and designed to “displace despair with opportunity.” With this story, Meisel brings the moral foundations of community engagement work to the forefront, a perspective that serves as a counterpoint to higher education climates dominated by neoliberal frameworks that rationalize community engagement as a marketing strategy.

In the introduction, Hoy and Johnson ground the Bonner Foundation’s theoretical approach to engagement within the context of other recent engaged scholarship from partner institutions such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* report, and the Department of Education’s National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. The introduction also provides a review of literature for the major themes of the book. More important, the reader

gets the sense that the Bonner approach has informed and been informed by recent engaged scholarship.

The first section of the book, “Students as Civic-Minded Professionals: An Approach for Student Development,” includes four chapters dedicated to the student experience in *deep* community engagement. The chapter by Johnson, Levy, Cichetti, and Zinkiewicz on the National Assessment of Service and Community Engagement (NASCE) is particularly useful in that it gives a concise overview of the national assessment and clearly describes the information provided by the survey. Key findings from the survey, including the dramatic decline in service from high school to college for most students, are thought-provoking.

The second and third sections of the book explore *deep* engagement models for partnership and faculty. The chapters provide unique perspectives on well-researched themes within engagement scholarship. For example, Beth Blissman’s piece, “Wisdom from the Garden: Exploring Faculty Transformation,” is an unexpected and beautifully written contribution to the book. Drawing on ecological and cosmogenic theories, this chapter is a poetic reflection on the varied faculty motivations for participation in community-engaged pedagogies. Blissman presents an eclectic compilation of writing styles and voices, moving creatively between the perspectives of researcher, gardener, and spiritual leader. The chapter begins with poetry, then reviews the literature around faculty motivations for engagement, takes readers through a walk in the garden, and concludes with a sermon. Part of the chapter reads like a how-to article from *Organic Gardening*, with advice such as “Plant the Seeds Continuously” and “Perennials Rock.” Blissman grounds her wisdom about community engagement in the cosmic realization of the interconnectedness of all things. Her writing style is an example of the creative and organic work of community engagement, displaying a beauty that sometimes is lost in pretentious and dense academic language.

One of the unique aspects of the book is the fourth topic, which focuses on centers. This section is especially useful for campuses with civic engagement or service-learning centers or for those exploring the viability of such a center. The four chapters discuss best practices, infrastructure, technology, and strategic planning. Marshal Welch and John Saltmarsh have an important and highly useful chapter on centers that presents the best practices mined from a review of 100 successful Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement Classification applications.

The final section of the book offers responses to the text, including a chapter from Dan Butin, who is also the editor of the series *Community Engagement in Higher Education*, of which this book is the third volume. Butin's piece is a critical discussion of the concept of "deep" in the term *deep institutional community engagement*. Butin indicates high regard for the Bonner programs but notes that even in the best of circumstances the depths of the community engagement initiatives within the context of their home institutions are questionable. Butin posits the notion that our engagement efforts may be institutionally tapped out instead of transformational. Butin, however, is not speaking as a contrarian who refuses to acknowledge the successes of the community engagement movement. Rather, he asks a prophetic question: *What if this is as "deep" as it gets?* Butin suggests that external forces like demography, technology, and politics are transforming our institutions at a much faster rate than our attempts to encourage engagement from within. According to Butin, those of us in community engagement need to take solace in the depths of our relationships with students and community partners and creatively explore how community engagement may change as our institutions transform due to external pressures.

In many ways, Butin's response is the perfect counterbalance to the lessons of *Deepening Community Engagement in Higher Education*. The Bonner programs demonstrate that we can and must forge deep relationships with students, partners, faculty, and staff in the context of community engagement in higher education. We build these relationships for moral and social justice reasons because we are committed to helping the person who is hurting and displacing despair with opportunities. This, however, is not the primary mission of the college or university, even though many institutions care about their communities.

Overall, I feel quite relieved to be given permission by the book's final chapter to abandon efforts to transform my institution's outlook on community engagement. Thanks to this volume, I now have a research-based road map of *deep* engagement modeled after Bonner's success: Take care of one another, especially those in need.

## Reference

- Hackett, R. (Ed.). (2014). *History & mission, Bonner Foundation*. Retrieved April 3, 2014, from <http://bonnernetnetwork.pbworks.com/w/page/13111854/Bonner-History-and-Mission>

## **About the Reviewer**

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