

Keith, N. Z. (2015). *Engaging in social partnerships: Democratic practices for campus–community partnerships*. New York, NY: Routledge. 274 pp.

Review by Frank A. Fear

The title of this book seemed unremarkable at first. With a sea of books about campus–community partnerships, I was not excited about reading another. And what does Keith mean by the term *partnerships*? Partnerships with whom? For what purpose?

Relief came quickly. *Engaging in Social Partnerships* is not just another book about partnerships. It is a book about higher education engagement with a defining theme of *democratic practices that advance the public good*. Keith elaborates:

With this book I wanted to promote a vision of . . . the good society. It is a society with more equity and justice, a deep sort of democracy, one in which we are able to work together—to struggle together—and build a common future out of a fractured, oppression-driven, and very imperfect past and present. (p. 229)

With that intent in mind, Keith is specific about her use of the word *partnerships*. She views it as border-crossing with special attention given “to the dynamics of power, culture and difference” (p. xiv).

She sees two challenges associated with framing partnerships that way. The first “involves stepping out of established roles, power structures, and organizational-professional cultures and entering a world that is about enabling power of mutual relationships and shared observations, interests, and purposes.” And second (relevant especially for higher education partners) is “becoming aware of how our organizational structures and our normal ways of communicating, sharing, and engaging diverse others *unwittingly create and sustain borders and hinder social justice agendas*” (p. xiv, italics added).

Be still, my heart! This way of thinking drew me to engagement over 25 years ago. But, as we know, engagement has evolved to mean many things—both in and outside the academy. The quest for social justice using the approach Keith describes is but one.

Keith acknowledges engagement's variants gently and not judgmentally, including the delivery of expert knowledge (a.k.a. outreach). Rather than conclude "outreach isn't engagement," Keith recognizes the important contributions made by that work. Take, for example, Marc Edwards's work in Flint, Michigan, where he and his research team confirmed the presence of lead in the city's water system (Itkowitz, 2016). What Keith does not do gently or nonjudgmentally is take on the 800-pound gorilla in higher education: the commercialization and marketization of colleges and universities. The business culture, so pervasive in higher education these days, is perhaps the biggest change the academy has experienced in the past half-century.

But does this orientation—what some scholars call "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009)—serve democratic practices? "No!" Keith answers. Through the influence of modernity, and now neoliberalism, the development of "enterprising and competitive entrepreneur[s]" (p. 66) is the predominant emphasis at America's colleges and universities, not the development of "social trustees with moral, ethical, and collective responsibilities" (p. 65). There certainly does not need to be a choice between the two but, time and time again in higher education, there is.

Why is that? Keith argues that neoliberalism has become the taken for granted, "normalized," way of the academy. That normalization has come at a cost, she asserts, because it is "a major obstacle to the desired transformation of the university-based expert into a civic professional able to promote democratic engagement" (p. 68). Donald Schön recognized that obstacle over 20 years ago when he issued a warning: "The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology" (1995). The movement will have limited reach, he speculated, unless a different epistemology (other than what he called "Technical Rationality") becomes the academy's dominant epistemology.

Keith's entire book is about a different epistemology, an epistemology associated with being a *democratic civic professional*. But "getting there," she asserts, comes neither naturally nor easily. It is a product of struggle and change instead. Why? Most academics are trained to work in a normalized manner. Technical rationality expressed through engagement as outreach is an example. Movement away from that norm, Keith continues, requires "disturbing and interrupting the normal" (e.g., pp. 14–15). That means *unlearning* the foundation of one's work and migrating to a new space, which Keith labels "*The Third Space*" (see pp. 93–94). The Third Space involves "moving from the familiar, to an 'empty space,'

and then to a new space where we build new meanings, norms, and a new cultural order” (p. 93).

For academics, the migration includes fieldwork; reflecting on experience; allowing oneself to be vulnerable; writing about experience; and creating new language, frameworks, and propositions. Embedded in all of that is being open and inviting to nonacademics. Big leaps come when nonacademic partners influence how scholars think and practice their work. The outcome? The “what and how” of work changes . . . and so do the scholars involved. Not surprising, then, are Keith’s parting words: “The process of thinking about the subject of this book and about practical wisdom has changed me” (p. 229).

Therein lies what could be an inherent limitation of this book. What about those who do not come to this book with significant experience or background? For those readers the value of *Engaging in Social Partnerships* may be as a “come back to” book—revisited as a frame of reference for discussing and interpreting field experience. In the meantime, Keith includes multiple case studies to give new readers a taste of the experience (e.g., Chapters 6–8). Those with experience may prefer jumping around in their reading. I found these chapters to be especially relevant (and I read them in this order): “Social Partnerships Across Social Divides” (Chapter 1), “Going Forward” (Chapter 9), “Democratic Engagement in Higher Education: Between Modernity and Neoliberalism” (Chapter 3), and “Toward Wise Practice for University–Community Collaborations” (Chapter 5).

Although there is plenty of substance in this book, Keith does not address a major subject by choice: “The Engaged Institution,” which she expressly leaves to others. Despite her caveat, I believe the book has great value for those responsible for, and interested in, the evolution of the engaged institution. Why? It’s a portrait of work that *should* be getting more attention as institutions define, and set priorities for, engagement work.

There’s a reason I say that. When the engagement movement was being framed and gained traction, there weren’t many scholars, like Keith, writing about this work. Instead, much of the nodal and influential writing of the day was done by administrators and other executives (e.g., university presidents, foundation officials, public officeholders), not scholars. The common plea of that writing collective was for universities and colleges to become “more engaged institutions”—an anthem that was expressed commonly through speeches and other declarative-like renditions loaded with sound

bites (e.g., “the New American College,” “higher education has a covenant with society”).

Now, 25 years later, it is possible to speculate about what change has occurred and how much change has taken place. For the most part, change has come in terms of widespread acceptance of “engaged scholarship.” That work is viewed broadly as legitimate academic work, organized and evaluated similarly to other academic pursuits. And that is progress, too. Heretofore the work had occupied the institutional margins, neither generally understood nor academically valued. Today, faculty can make a career of the work. Much good scholarship is being produced, too.

What about higher educational institutions? For the most part, our colleges and universities are not much different from what they were years ago. And while it’s wishful thinking to contemplate what might have happened if the work of scholars, like Keith, had influenced directions from the start, it is never too late to ask: What if senior executives were to draw on Keith’s work (and similar scholarship) to strategize about engagement’s future directions?

That would be a good move for a good reason. It’s not that engagement, alone, is between modernity and neoliberalism (per Keith, Chapter 3). Higher education, writ large, occupies that space as well. Although a considerable amount of work taking place in higher education today is progressive, *higher education as an institution is neoliberal*.

Engagement will flourish if that changes. *Engaging in Social Partnerships* offers good ideas about how.

References

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About the Reviewer

Frank A. Fear is professor emeritus, Michigan State University, where he served as a faculty member for over 35 years. He is Senior Fellow at MSU Outreach and Engagement. He earned his Ph.D. in sociology from Iowa State University.