

Brunner, B. R. (Ed). *Creating citizens: Liberal arts, civic engagement, and the land-grant tradition*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press. 192 pp.

Review by Timothy J. Shaffer

Articulating Engagement in the Land-Grant University Through the Liberal Arts

What is the purpose of higher education? What role do academic institutions have, especially land-grant universities, in shaping students in particular ways? And, most relevant to this edited book, in what ways do faculty members in the liberal arts define the essence of university and community engagement through their teaching and research?

What's striking about this relatively thin collection of case-based chapters from scholars at Auburn University is how *normal* their chapters are. In many ways, this book could have been written by faculty members at any institution that is committed to civic and community engagement. When I first read the book, not much stood out to me. This isn't a flaw; instead, this feel of the book can make it more accessible. Chapters are devoid of jargon or overly theoretical arguments about the topics at hand. If you are looking for new terrain in the theory of engaged scholarship, this volume may disappoint. But if you're a faculty member, department head, director of a center for engagement, or administrator (particularly in the liberal arts), this book offers concrete examples of how faculty members have engaged diverse communities, which could be useful as real-world examples for others trying to find their place in the academy while also remaining committed to engaged scholarship.

Brunner begins her introduction by helpfully framing the work of Auburn University as having emerged from the land-grant and extension traditions, two critical elements that shape how higher education has played a role in understanding and responding to public challenges. Land-grant universities, or "democracy's colleges," as they have been called, are important sites for democratic work (*Peters, 2015; Ross, 1942*). Although land-grants can be viewed as research-intensive universities in which basic research is conducted at a distance from messy community issues, these institutions also play critical roles in teaching future generations and cultivating more vibrant communities through community-based participatory research and service-learning opportunities. In short,

they are multifaceted and complex institutions. Given the multiple, competing views of what the university is and should be, it is helpful to tease out what engagement looks like within a research university context. It is within that particular context that I raise concerns about two aspects of this book that, I feel, weaken the argument made by the volume's contributors.

First, Brunner and the other authors chose to use the phrase "Civic and Community Engagement" or "CCE" for the diverse forms of CCE found in communities throughout Alabama. Because this phrase is ubiquitous throughout the book, I would have liked to see the editor more clearly define it at the beginning. The statement that "a liberal arts education is Civic and Community Engagement (CCE)" (p. 3) didn't really explain much. What about the colleges of engineering or human ecology? Would those faculties not be able to say that they are seeking to cultivate skills and responsibility within students while building reciprocal relationships with partners beyond campus? What is unique about the liberal arts? A more explicit and critical edge would have been welcomed, especially since the book is framed around CCE through a liberal arts college experience. I say all of this as someone who was educated in the liberal arts tradition and is in agreement about the deep civic concerns emerging from the humanities. I believe strongly in the liberal education model, and it seems that connecting humanistic approaches and understandings to public problems is an essential element to dealing with the many complex issues facing our world. A challenge is that departments in liberal arts colleges are often *prima facie* disconnected from the "real world." Engaged scholarship is a way to counter that perception, but we need more emphatic and convincing statements and demonstrations to assuage the concerns of skeptical colleagues and publics.

Second, Brunner's introduction draws on scholarship published in the *JHEOE* by Alperovitz and Howard (2005). Brunner notes, "Engagement is more than extension, conventional outreach, and public service"; it is "about a two-way, reciprocal relationship in which both the university and community partners share in the development of learning and knowledge" (p. 4). This broader definition aligns with much of the literature about the advocacy of community engagement; however, acknowledging the roots from which contemporary engagement efforts have grown remains important. Given this volume's focus on the land-grant institution, it is unfortunate that engagement is positioned in a way that assumes extension, for example, is only a "one-way interaction" (p. 4). Although this view might be accurate in certain circumstances (or, frankly, all

too often), engaged scholars must be careful not to create strawmen within their own institutions. As someone who studies the history of land-grant universities and Cooperative Extension, I can attest to the frustrations with the system but also the rich examples of scholars and educators committed to the tenets of CCE, often without explicitly speaking about their work in such ways. There are historical and contemporary examples to acknowledge and learn from, so this statement positioning CCE in contrast to the other elements of our institutions was disappointing (see *Peters, 2010; Shaffer, 2017*). It felt like a somewhat obligatory statement to make—ensuring that CCE was distinguished from other aspects of the university—but a more nuanced approach would have been appropriate and more useful, especially when trying to make the case for this work. Those criticisms aside, the book is a useful resource addressing the intersection of the liberal arts and CCE.

The book is divided into three sections with nine chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion by the editor. Brunner states explicitly that “this book [is] a guide for those who want to create a community or civic engagement program at their respective institutions” (p. 6). Auburn’s College of Liberal Arts looked to other institutions for models and inspiration as they developed their own programs and courses, and the editor assembled this volume as such a resource for others. A common theme throughout the book is the connection between CCE and a sense of oneself as an academic. That concept of self is important because of the various obstacles that departmental, college, and university cultures present for individuals committed to CCE. For faculty in colleges of liberal arts, this book gives a detailed look at ways to align civic commitments and identities with teaching and research endeavors. For those in other settings, the chapters provide a useful case-study approach to outlining what was done in curricular, cocurricular, or research contexts.

Making the Case for Support of Community and Civic Engagement

Although CCE is typically found across universities in academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative and service offices, the heart of the university remains with the faculty. Achieving acknowledgment and acceptance for engaged scholarship alongside more traditional forms of scholarship remains a central challenge for the field. Brunner references key documents such as *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution* (*Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities*,

1999), “The scholarship of engagement” (Boyer, 1996), and more recent works that have further defined how engagement isn’t something in addition to teaching and research, but is an approach and disposition that grounds one’s scholarly work. Brunner laments the ways in which typical metrics for promotion and tenure do not align with or encompass CCE, concluding that scholars committed to CCE have a choice: “They can either decide to fight the current structure by reforming expectations and reward systems, or they can seek ways to fit their work within the current structure by explaining their work in terms that are understood in the current system” (p. 16). This acknowledgment of the multiple paths for approaching CCE as a scholar is important because it highlights the practical aspects of navigating professional identities and roles. Doing so encompasses both figuring out how to frame one’s CCE scholarship to be understood by colleagues who are not grounded in the literatures and methods of CCE, as well as broadening definitions of scholarship to include such artifacts as technical reports and community partner reports (p. 16). Expanding definitions of scholarship so that CCE can be evaluated for merit, support, and rewards is important for its practitioners, and Brunner rightly speaks to this issue.

In another practical aspect of the book for faculty, Brunner offers suggestions for developing a scholarly identity and record based on engaged scholarship. Subsections such as “Know the Movers and Shakers” and “Find a Mentor” serve to remind the reader that being an engaged scholar requires navigating an institution that might be more sympathetic to one’s work in principle than in practice. When reading this chapter, I was struck by how the book builds on a development within the engagement literature that feels like a “how to” approach to making CCE a possibility on university campuses (Shaffer, 2013).

Examples in Practice

Although the book is divided into three sections, I found myself putting chapters 2–9 into a similar category of practical case studies, with such topics as internship programs for political science students and partnerships for a German-language program supported by the numerous German-based and German-owned companies in Alabama. These chapters offer insight into how faculty members have developed programs, pedagogical experiences, and partnerships through a CCE lens. Each case study presents a unique opportunity and commitment to “foster a life of the mind and cultivate a general appreciation for literacy and artistic works

that capture the rich complexity of human experience” while also equipping students with “practical learning that they can use to obtain meaningful employment and take an active role in civic life outside the classroom” (p. 45). This approach is particularly relevant for faculty members in a college of liberal arts.

One chapter that stood out to me was Nan Fairley’s “Nobody Is Telling Our Story.” It highlights the great strength of teaching journalism students not just how to write a story but also to see their work as deeply relational and public-serving beyond the confines of a class assignment. Drawing on the concept of public work—work that makes things of value and importance in cooperation with others, as espoused by Harry Boyte and Jack Shelton—Fairley states that “community journalism produced by university students in often-underserved communities is a clear form of . . . public work” (pp. 101–102). Such an approach to CCE transcends simple articulations of community-based learning. It addresses deeper issues of democratic life and the role of professionals in cultivating possibilities for communities whose members have otherwise felt left behind or ignored. Further, Fairley notes how students who participated in a class assignment about a community established genuine relationships and subsequently worked with partners beyond the class. This chapter points to the prospects that classes and disciplines can realize with CCE through a public-oriented approach. The emergence of these prospects was made possible by an instructor’s clear expectations and sense of possibilities, as well as an approach to her own teaching and engagement as something more than an assignment for a grade. Such a public-oriented approach isn’t always possible, but when it’s done, it can have significant impact on all involved.

In Conclusion

Overall, the book accomplishes its goal of providing examples of CCE within the context of a college of liberal arts in a land-grant university. Each chapter points to the necessary ingredients of time, thought, and dedication along with passion, commitment, and new thinking. Interestingly, the conclusion includes a section written by a community partner. Writing about volunteer opportunities for students that enable her organization to get books into the hands of at-risk young children, Cathy Gifford captures the critical element of CCE for partners: Without volunteers, some community organizations would struggle to meet their mission. The inclusion of a community partner in the book is powerful, but it’s striking that the example offered is of a volunteer program. This was curious

to me, especially as the literature has largely developed beyond volunteerism and critiqued the impact of such experiences.

Nevertheless, there is impact and, ideally, learning about problems and how to address them when students experience CCE. As Brunner notes, “while higher education cannot necessarily solve society’s problems, higher education can help everyone to better understand those problems and to develop ideas and strategies that may lead to resolution” (p. 161). Because there is a clear public purpose to this work, it is only appropriate that it occurs within the land-grant university. But challenges persist: Finding support, resources, and recognition remain obstacles for faculty. Following Beere, Votruba, and Wells (2011), Brunner very clearly lays out lessons learned and suggestions for those attempting to develop or expand CCE and engaged scholarship on their campuses. In the end, the content is not earth-shattering or completely unlike other scholarship on CCE. Still, it is very useful to have another resource that demonstrates the possibilities of engaged scholarship and why it is critical for every aspect of the university to think about what that looks like within particular contexts—such as Auburn University’s College of Liberal Arts. I could see this volume being particularly useful to faculty and administrators in the arts and humanities, especially for professional development and enrichment opportunities. The book includes useful cases for the novice and established scholar alike.

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