

Derek W. M. Barker and David W. Brown, eds. *A Different Kind of Politics: Readings on the Role of Higher Education in Democracy*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2009.

Review by Albert W. Dzur

First, a confession: I love the university and draw life force from quirky faculty, questioning students, and committed administrators. No other institution has higher levels of work autonomy, collegial equality, reciprocity, dedication to common goods, and creative achievement. I have never felt fully at home anywhere else. But there is something awry in American higher education, something that the Kettering Foundation research skillfully presented by Derek W. M. Barker and David W. Brown in *A Different Kind of Politics* helps identify: a condition of successful failure. Focusing solely on knowledge production and dissemination, America's colleges and universities are success stories—indeed, they often serve as models for other countries. Yet through a wider lens one sees a disturbing disconnection between academia and civic life. At a time of widespread distrust of politics, public institutions, and officials; and a time of deep-seated policy problems in criminal justice, health care, K-12 education, and the environment, colleges and universities appear complacent. Though most offer gestures, such as service-learning and civic engagement courses, they have failed more fundamentally to align organizational resources to what must be the next great academic mission: restoring American democracy.¹

In the book's first chapter, Matt Hartley and Liz Hollander review recent Kettering research on higher education to provide important context. For the last 20 years, colleges and universities have promulgated civic mission statements, endorsed service-learning pedagogy, and begun to recognize the scholarship of engagement. Yet, according to Hartley and Hollander, these efforts remain symbolic and apolitical. It is as if civic efforts on campus, and the wider civic life off campus, are "two ships passing in the night," as David Mathews writes in his afterword to this volume. Issuing what can be called "the John Dewey challenge," Hartley and Hollander write that "powerful civic education will be achieved when student experiences in and out of the classroom are consciously designed to provide myriad, different, but reinforcing, opportunities to gain civic knowledge and skills, including skills for 'political' participation" (p. 12). The barriers to this comprehensive and straightforwardly political paradigm for academia are high and deeply rooted:

- chronic administrative wariness of student activism;
- disciplinary pressures on faculty members for publishable research that make external public activities altruistic at best, and professionally suicidal at worst; and
- intellectual elitism regarding the superiority of academic knowledge.

Not all the blame belongs in the ivory tower, however. After all, the public culture outside academia is marked by a widespread reflexive view of universities as gateways to better jobs, not as civic catalysts.

Barriers—for questioning and committed people at least—are for surmounting. The book's following four chapters each include case studies, analyses, and interviews focusing on ways more democratic pedagogies, scholarship and professional roles, university-community relationships, and faculty motivations have sought to meet the John Dewey challenge. Chapter 2 presents an impressive example of what can be achieved pedagogically: Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan's Democracy Fellows program at Wake Forest University, which introduced a group of 30 first-year students to the National Issues Forums model of deliberation. Over the course of four years, Harriger and McMillan encouraged their students to employ the model on their own in a campuswide discussion about the lack of a sense of community at the university, and then in an off-campus forum on urban sprawl in Winston-Salem. Democracy Fellows program students learned democracy by "doing democracy," and, as a result, gained a sense of efficacy and responsibility about their role in the public world. Another example in Chapter 2 is the sharing of pedagogical experiences with deliberative forums, by David Cooper at Michigan State University and Joni Doherty at Franklin Pierce University. Both note how the deliberative norms of respectful, constructive communication across lines of difference strike deep chords with students and faculty members. These deliberative norms are much needed in, but often absent from, public life.

Harry Boyte's influential conception of public scholarship is at the center of Chapter 3. Boyte makes the crucial point that universities are not merely complacent bystanders to the dysfunctions of American democracy: their cultures of technocratic professionalism are part of the problem. "Technocratic politics—domination by experts removed from a common civic life—has spread throughout contemporary society like a silent disease," he writes. It

“turns groups of people into abstract categories,” “decontextualizes ‘problems’ from the civic life of communities,” “privatizes the world and creates cultures based on a philosophy of scarcity,” and “profoundly erodes the subjective experience of equal respect” (p. 42). The antidote is a public work model of scholarship, which places academics in horizontal relationships with community members, and embeds research in the ongoing problems of cities, towns, and neighborhoods. This marks a much-needed paradigm shift from *delivering* expertise and service to *creating* relationships and problem-solving networks. Precedents exist close to hand, however, as Scott Peters’ work (cited in the chapter) affirms. Research programs grounded in reciprocal relationships between academics and community members have been traditional features of land-grant universities for over a century.

Developing campus-community relationships marked by equality and reciprocity requires special skills and an expansive, indeed radical, understanding of how the professional identities of academics are legitimated. As Sean Creighton points out in Chapter 4, community organizations frequently express frustration with the bureaucratic impediments, elitism, and lack of long-term commitment from university partners. By contrast, an example of constructive partnership is presented by the Jane Addams School for Democracy (JAS) in St. Paul, which fosters collaboration between college students and immigrant families. An important difference between JAS and the typical model of campus engagement, according to cofounders Nan Kari and Nan Skelton, is the fact that JAS is multidimensional rather than established to serve a limited purpose with a closely circumscribed set of “deliverables.” JAS emphasizes “shared research, curriculum development, faculty development, student work-study, and internships,” all in service to the overall goal of “shared public work to build civic skills so that diverse people can cocreate a better common life” (p. 65). Such efforts reverberate powerfully to revitalize both neighborhood and campus cultures, but they require a deep investment of time and resources, as Peggy Shaffer notes:

It means making a real commitment to creating sustainable communities, sharing resources and knowledge, providing a space for public debate and discussion, prioritizing the generation and dissemination of actionable knowledge, and privileging public agency and public work as the most important skills students will gain through their college education. (p. 72)

What motivates faculty members to jump into more democratic forms of teaching and research when their own disciplines and departments reward academic business as usual? Bill Doherty's personal explanation in Chapter 5 is instructive: "I realized that I and my profession were part of the problem, not just part of the solution to our country's social problems" (p. 80). In response, Doherty began networking with other family therapy scholars and practitioners, and sought out ways to connect to larger groups of parents in public forums. Rather than serving as a visiting expert, however, Doherty helped parents self-organize to solve their own problems, an experience that transformed his own research agenda and professional identity. Doherty's reflections show how closer relationships with community members and more attentiveness to public rather than disciplinary problems can contribute to, rather than detract from, exemplary scholarship. As KerryAnn O'Meara reflects, it is ultimately individuals who choose a more democratic professional identity as a result of their own intrinsic motivations. Nevertheless, university governance, academic reward systems, and college and departmental cultures can help provide the job security, workplace resources, and, most important of all, the time for faculty to engage in public work. Unfortunately, few campuses stand out as exemplars in this regard, even though individual public scholars thrive at a wide range of institutions—from two-year community colleges to research universities.

While there is much to celebrate and admire, we should be sober about counter-democratic tendencies present in public attitudes and administrative imperatives. In my view, current public attitudes that privilege "economic" over "civic" can and will change over time as public work between campus and community increases, and it becomes clear that these are not competing goals. The technocratic rationality so prominent in administrative cultures, however, may be more difficult to address. University ideology contends that universities operate as bottom-up collegial organizations, but in contemporary reality they are highly unaccountable top-down managerial structures. For example, they rely on private search firms, trustees, and regents to choose top personnel like presidents and provosts with scant input from faculty members, students, and community members. Worse still, the performance of central administrators is evaluated using procedures that are often less transparent and public than those used in business firms. At many institutions, especially in the second and third tiers of mainstream rankings, the worst of both worlds is all too common: management is neither corporate in competence nor

collegial in character. While there are democratic professionals among administrators at the cutting edge of the higher education reform movement, it is likely that faculty members and students will be the driving forces.² Harry Boyte may be right to urge this movement to learn the language and skills of community organizing: take responsibility for your public space, view others as assets, communicate across lines of difference, map out power and resources, and settle in for a long-term struggle.

By providing intellectual support, conceptual tools, useful terminology, and inspiring cases and practitioner stories, *A Different Kind of Politics* will be a significant resource for those seeking change. Kettering Foundation scholars' research into the intertwined fate of democracy and higher education has yielded results that are at once sobering and optimistic, as well as theoretically rich and highly practical. This volume is evidence that the Kettering Foundation is one of the country's leading champions for restorative democratic thought and action.

Endnotes

1. Hyperbole? One of the country's most respected political theorists now calls the United States an "inverted totalitarian" state. Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).
2. For example, Bruce Mallory, former provost of the University of New Hampshire, leads a national working group focused on democratic leadership in higher education. Liz Coleman, president of Bennington College, has also been a vocal advocate. See her 2009 TED address: http://www.ted.com/talks/liz_coleman_s_call_to_reinvent_liberal_arts_education.html.

About the Reviewer

Albert W. Dzur is the author of *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice*. An associate professor of political science and philosophy at Bowling Green State University, he has written widely on participatory democracy, and served on an Obama '08 campaign committee on civic engagement.

