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Reconstructing Civic Professionalism in Academic Life: A Response to Mark Wood's Paper, "From Service to Solidarity"

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Abstract

This paper takes issue with Mark Wood's political activism approach for pursuing the goals of the engagement movement, suggesting instead an approach that is based on reconstructing an identity and practice of civic professionalism in academic life. Two practice stories of civic professionalism are presented and discussed, illustrating its promise of meeting Barbara Holland's dual academic and civic standard for defining and assessing the engaged institution.

What roles can and should scholars play in civic life? How might they contribute to the development and strengthening of democratic institutions and ideals, a democratic culture, and the habits and capacities of active citizenship? In what ways does the pursuit and practice of democracy relate to or connect with the work of the nation's half a million professional scholars and the missions of the over 3,500 colleges and universities that employ them?

Until quite recently, questions such as these have received little serious attention. But that has begun to change. Thanks to the civic engagement and renewal movement that has been slowly emerging over the past decade or so in American higher education, questions about the role and place of scholars in civic life are beginning to be asked and debated in the academic literature, in the conferences and activities of disciplinary associations and societies, and in the context of institutional reform and planning efforts *(Lynton 1995; Boyer 1996; Ehrlich and Hollander 1999; Kellogg Commission 1999; Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999; Ehrlich 2000; Jacoby and Associates 2003; Ward 2003; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens 2003)*.

There is no single "right answer" to these questions. Scholars and their institutions can and do engage in and contribute to civic life in many ways. This variety reflects the dynamics and realities of different contexts and the pursuit of different interests and

purposes—even different understandings of the nature of democratic citizenship. There is, however, a standard that can be used to judge or assess specific examples of academic engagement, as well as the engagement movement as a whole: engagement must simultaneously advance both academic and civic interests. I refer to this standard as the "Holland standard," as I draw it from Barbara Holland's *(2001, 10)* provisional definition of the "engaged institution," which is based on her review of much of the engagement literature and a variety of institution-specific reform documents: "An engaged institution is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually beneficial exchange, exploration, and application of knowledge, expertise and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity."

"[T]he engagement movement should not be seen as—and should not become—a distraction or departure from the academy's core teaching and research functions."

In line with Holland's standard, the engagement movement should not be seen as—and should not become—a distraction or departure from the academy's core teaching and research functions. Rather, it must be a means for enriching and expanding these functions. This is the perspective from which I evaluate the proposal for achieving the goals of the engagement movement that Mark Wood puts forward in "From Service to Solidarity." Using opposition to the injustices of contemporary capitalism and the "market-model university" as his basis, Wood calls on his colleagues to foster a "relational economy" through educational engagement conceived of as "solidarity" rather than "service," an approach aimed at educating students to be "transformed nonconformists." As an example of this type of engagement, he briefly describes how he has combined classroom readings and discussions about "freedom fighters for democracy, justice, and human rights" with student involvement in a community partnership with the Richmond Coalition for a Living Wage.

In the final three paragraphs of his paper, Wood claims that his engagement work has enriched student learning and advanced the interests of the Richmond Coalition for a Living Wage. It thus

appears to fulfill Holland's standard, at least in part. (There is no mention of any research or "discovery" related to this work, so we must assume that there wasn't any.) However, the absence in his paper of any serious critical reflection, analysis, or evaluation of his work makes it difficult to judge the trustworthiness of his claims, and therefore, the potential effectiveness and promise of his proposal.

I'd like to be able to say that I support Wood's proposal. I agree with some of his views and ideals, and have my own concerns about the nature of global capitalism and the ways a market culture has come to erode public life and influence the culture of our institutions, including colleges and universities. Nevertheless, I find his proposal both weak and problematic. In my view, it adds up to little more than a call for professors to inspire and support student activism, reflecting an embrace of an oppositional protest politics that has sharp limits, both in its ability to advance the academy's learning and discovery missions, and in its ability to foster democratic ideals, interests and practices, inside and outside the academy. His proposal reflects the rest of his paper in being more ideological than scholarly, leaving little space for open-minded learning and discovery.

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In this invited response paper I'd like to point to an approach for achieving the goals of the engagement movement that offers promise of meeting Holland's standard more fully and effectively. In essence, the approach involves reconstructing an identity and practice of civic professionalism in academic life and work. *Civic professionalism*, as Thomas Bender *(1993, 1997)* and William Sullivan *(1995, 1999)* use the term, is a once vital but now substantially eroded tradition of professional practice that casts professionals' identities, roles, and expertise around a public mission. Civic professionalism places scholars inside civic life rather than apart from or above it, working alongside their fellow citizens on questions and issues of public importance.

As I envision it, reconstructing civic professionalism in academic life as a way of meeting Holland's standard will require

scholars to work toward three related aims. First, they must reorient their core identity and work toward both the public and their disciplinary peers, with both receiving serious levels of attention. Second, they must break out of patterns of civic detachment and disengagement and become directly engaged with publics in ways that allow them to enrich and expand their scholarly work. Third, they must reject a technocratic politics of expert rule, an advocacy politics of service, and an ideological politics of protest and learn instead to practice a democratic politics that is highly interactive, reciprocal, and developmental.

Reconstructing a civic professionalism in the academy along these lines has significant pedagogical, epistemological, and political dimensions. It will require scholars to do far more than simply encourage political activism among their students. They must ask themselves a fundamental question: how might they rethink and reshape their scholarly aims and practices, whatever their discipline, in order to enhance and deepen their participation in and contributions to civic life? Asking such a question will encourage scholars to rethink how and what they teach, how and for what purposes they conduct their research, how they carry their expertise into civic life, and how—as both citizens and scholars—they work and interact with their fellow citizens outside the academy. Scholars who adopt a civic professionalism by refocusing their work around a public mission must break with the "disciplinary professionalism" that historian Thomas Bender *(1997, 2001)* has argued has come to dominate the post-World War II era academy—an approach marked by scholars' almost exclusive focus inward toward their disciplinary peers rather than *outward* toward the public.

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It is important to stress that to break with disciplinary professionalism and begin a process of reconstructing civic professionalism is not to abandon one's discipline or one's academic work. Rather, in line with Holland's standard for assessing academic

engagement, it is to ask what sociologists, engineers, philosophers, historians, natural scientists, and others might contribute to civic life as *scholars*, and how teaching and research might be enriched and expanded through civic engagement.

The reconstruction of civic professionalism in the academy is not just a theoretical possibility. It is already under way, particularly (but not only) in the nation's system of state and land-grant colleges and universities. However, it has for the most part gone unrecognized and unnamed, and remains marginal to the academy's prevailing culture.

In a research initiative that a small team of colleagues and I have been conducting over the past three years on the practice of public scholarship in land-grant education, we have identified numerous scholars who are reconstructing a civic professionalism in their own work, disciplines, and institutions. In what follows, I briefly sketch the broad outlines of two particularly striking (and inspiring) stories we have discovered in our research that shed considerable light on the promise and challenges of civic professionalism in academic life. The stories are developed from the transcripts of in-depth, tape-recorded interviews my colleagues and I conducted with the scholars who are at the center of the stories, following semi-structured, open-ended question protocols *(Seidman 1998).* The interview protocol included three areas of questions: background questions that probed the scholar's personal and professional histories in order to uncover core commitments, interests, and influences; a detailed account of the scholar's role and work in a specific "practice story" *(Forester 1999)*, with a focus on the nature of the learning the scholar helped facilitate, the kinds of knowledge constructed in the work, and the civic dimensions of the scholar's practice; and reflective questions that were intended to draw out the scholar's view of the lessons, significance, and meaning of the practice story.

Two Stories of Civic Professionalism in Academic Life

The North Country Community Food and Economic Security Project: In late 1996, David Pelletier, then an untenured assistant professor of nutrition policy in the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell University, received a grant from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and USDA to conduct an experimental action research project in New York state aimed at developing and testing a model for involving citizens in community-based food and nutrition-related planning and policy making. The project idea

emerged from a series of intellectual and professional transformations Pelletier had undergone during his graduate work and twelve years of working as a research and extension associate on nutritional surveillance and community-based nutrition monitoring. Critical reflection on a series of failed attempts he had been involved in to influence nutrition policy through standard data collection and dissemination approaches led him to be open to experimenting with a more civically engaged approach that would directly involve ordinary citizens in deliberation and action planning on nutrition and food-related policies.

At the same time that Pelletier was developing the idea for his project, nutrition educators and program staff with the county-based Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) associations and Community Action Programs (CAP) in the North Country—a six-county region of upstate New York that includes Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence, Franklin, Clinton, and Essex counties—were finishing up a year-long process of regionalizing their nutrition programs. About the time Pelletier received his grant and started looking for a place in New York State to ground his project, David Bruce, the executive director of CCE in Jefferson County, called Pelletier to ask for his help in thinking through how the CCE and CAP agencies in the North Country might continue to collaborate regionally on food and nutrition-related issues. Pelletier agreed to attend a meeting to discuss their ideas, and mentioned that he had a grant for a project that might match their interests and concerns. At the meeting, which was held in St. Lawrence County, a group of CCE and CAP educators and staff from all six counties in the region brainstormed about regional-level food and nutrition-related issues and what they might do to address them. After listening to the discussion, Pelletier proposed that they involve people in each county in the region in a systematic discussion of local food and nutrition issues and possible plans for action, using a participatory visioning and planning approach called a "search conference" *(Emery and Purser 1996)*. Participants in the meeting agreed to the proposal, which Pelletier saw as a "match made in heaven" with his grant.

Over the next two years, Pelletier and his project team logged over thirty thousand miles of travel back and forth from Cornell's Ithaca campus and the North Country region, working on what the CCE and CAP partners decided to call the "North Country Community Food and Economic Security Project." The project evolved through three main phases. First, there was an organizing and

planning phase, during which the CCE and CAP staff and Pelletier sought to bring the directors of county agencies on board to participate in the project. Pelletier and a half-time staff member he hired functioned as the lead organizers in bringing these groups together. The first phase also included the recruitment of a citizen advisory committee that would work to refine the project idea, develop a plan for conducting the search conferences in each of the region's six counties, identify and recruit participants to attend them, and broaden local legitimacy and control. In the second phase of the project, which lasted from October 1997 through March 1998, search conferences were independently held in each of the six counties in the North Country. Each search conference lasted two and a half days, and each was attended by a diverse cross-section of thirty to fifty county residents. A total of thirty-four working groups were formed across the region to follow up on action plans generated at the search conferences. The final event of the project was a two-day multi-county conference held in the state capital at Albany in May 1998 that was designed to promote discussion across the working groups, explore possible ways of collaborating at the regional level, and identify possible sources of technical, financial, and policy support from state legislators and agencies and Cornell specialists.

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Pelletier played multiple overlapping roles throughout the North Country Project, including facilitator, organizer, civic educator, chronicler, and researcher. He viewed the project as a seamless integration of his extension and research responsibilities. It became a platform that allowed him to pursue civic education and development work with citizens and organizations in the North Country region. At the same time, it created a kind of "civic laboratory" for research on two related topics: the salience of the concept of "community food security" at the local level, and the efficacy of the search conference model for involving citizens in public deliberation that generates public judgment and collective vision and action.

Pelletier published three refereed journal papers from his research on these topics. He also wrote a policy memo to the USDA on the project's findings, and a bound report for each county documenting all of the project's activities and findings for the citizens and agency staff in the North Country. Shortly after his work on the North Country project was complete, he was promoted with tenure to associate professor. Since receiving tenure, Pelletier has shifted the focus of his work to an examination of the powerful role that state and federal policies play in limiting local action in the food system, which was one of the key findings of the North Country Project.

The Binghamton Quality Communities Project: Paula Horrigan, a tenured associate professor of landscape architecture at Cornell University, teaches an intensive five-credit senior community design studio each spring. The course uses a service-learning approach to community design, immersing students in a real-world project where they must work collaboratively with community residents and each other in every phase of the design process. During the 2002 spring semester, Horrigan cotaught the course with Cheryl Doble, an assistant professor of landscape architecture in the College of Environmental Science and Forestry at Syracuse University. Students from both universities enrolled in the course.

A few months before the 2002 spring semester began, Horrigan and Doble began to put together a grant proposal for the New York State Quality Communities Initiative. The initiative supports projects involving State University of New York (SUNY) institutions that aim to work with and contribute to twelve designated communities that are in particular need of economic and community development. After engaging in discussions with state and city officials, Horrigan and Doble decided to focus both their proposal and their class on a community design project in the North Side of Binghamton, New York, a small, distressed city of just under fifty thousand residents that is located about forty miles southeast of the Cornell campus in Ithaca. A staff member in city hall told them about a faith-based neighborhood group on the North Side of the city called the Communities of Shalom, thinking that the group might be interested in working with them. The group had recently formed and was beginning to search for ways to become active in community development in the North Side. Horrigan and Doble approached one of the leaders of the group, and after overcoming his initial skepticism about the value of

collaborating with university professors, he agreed to take the proposal to the group for consideration. The group agreed to work with them, in large measure because they liked the way Horrigan and Doble approached collaboration: they stressed that they wanted to work with the neighborhood, rather than for or on it.

"Horrigan and Doble . . . stressed that they wanted to work with the neighborhood, rather than for or on it."

Over the course of the semester, the class met five times with neighborhood residents in various churches on Binghamton's North Side, each time on a Sunday afternoon and evening that included sharing a potluck meal. In these work sessions, Horrigan and Doble guided their students through a process of conversation, deliberation, and collaborative design with North Side residents. An initial visioning session was held with the community, during which students worked to draw out stories of the neighborhood's history and development. Work groups of students and residents were formed around four priority areas that were identified in the initial visioning meeting. The groups included a visioning group, a neighborhood group, a riverfront group, and a marketplace group. The semester culminated in a neighborhood-wide meeting, during which students and residents displayed and discussed a set of scale models and maps the students had created of a redesigned neighborhood that reflected the visions of the residents.

As the semester evolved, Horrigan played mentoring and what she referred to as "shepherding" roles with her students, both in the community and in campus-based labs where students reflected on their community experiences and practiced a variety of technical landscape architecture skills. She also played a variety of technical assistance and civic education roles with the Communities of Shalom group, including facilitator, negotiator, grant writer, and organizer. After the semester was over, Horrigan continued her work with the Communities of Shalom and city officials and staff, writing grant applications and receiving grant monies from the state—including a grant from the Quality Communities Initiative—to build on the work the students had helped to start. As of this writing, the project continues to evolve and expand, with Horrigan continuing to play a variety of key roles.

Horrigan has done a variety of writing and presenting with Doble on their scholarship in the Binghamton project. They have authored a book chapter and a journal article, presented at state and national conferences, and written several reports to city and stage agencies on their work. They have also written evaluations of the course, which draw on interviews they conducted with students and neighborhood residents who participated in the project.

Discussion

In my experience in the state and land-grant system, there are four different assumptions or perceptions that many people hold about scholars who choose to engage in civic life: that they contribute mainly or even only as technicians who "apply" their technical expertise to the solving of predetermined technical problems; that they work as volunteers who respond to immediate, short-term requests for help from external constituencies; that they work as advocates or activist protesters rather than scholars; and that there is a zero-sum tradeoff between their "volunteer" time spent on engagement and their professional time spent doing "real" scholarship. The practice stories sketched above counter such assumptions by revealing a different possibility. Here scholars play proactive roles as civic leaders, taking on broad civic education roles rather than serving only as narrow volunteer technicians, advocates, or activist protesters. They integrate their public work *(Boyte and Kari 1996)* with their scholarship over relatively long time periods with specific publics that are engaged in not only problem solving, but "problem setting" *(Schön 1983)*, an open-ended, deliberative, developmental process of coming to understand not just how to solve technical problems, but how to identify, frame, and understand civic issues and problems and what ought to be done about them, in pursuit of public values and interests.

What we see in the practice stories are academic civic professionals functioning as civic leaders, educators, and scholars. In each story, it is the scholar acting as a civic leader who takes the initiative for calling people to public work—in Pelletier's case, deliberation over regional food and nutrition issues and policy; in Horrigan's, the creation of a collaborative design for a distressed neighborhood. While each scholar brought technical knowledge and expertise to the table, each also functioned as a civic educator committed to the pursuit of civic as well as technical ends in ways that were intended to develop the civic capacities, knowledge, and skills of citizens. Each used adult learning approaches centered

on dialogue rather than lecturing or telling. Each also *challenged* rather than merely responded to or "served" community members. For example, Horrigan challenged the sometimes cynical and pessimistic neighborhood residents on Binghamton's North Side to think more positively and imaginatively about new possibilities for their neighborhood, to see themselves as capable actors rather than helpless victims or clients, and to think beyond working only on small-scale, immediate self-interests to broader, longer-term collective interests that linked the fate of their neighborhood to the fate of the city as a whole.

In these practice stories, Pelletier and Horrigan did not enter public life as short-term volunteers motivated by a sense of altruism, or activist protesters motivated by ideology. Rather, they entered public life as serious scholars motivated by a combination of civic and academic interests and goals they wanted to pursue and achieve. Each deliberately created a platform for public work that served as a kind of civic laboratory for teaching and research. Each produced significant scholarly products in and through their public work. Their civic contributions were made as an integral component of their scholarly work rather than as extra volunteer add-ons, revealing how deeply citizenship is embedded in their identities and their work as professional scholars.

"[Pelletier and Horrigan] entered public life as serious scholars motivated by a combination of civic and academic interests and goals they wanted to pursue and achieve."

These scholars were simultaneously facilitating two broad types of learning: "instrumental" learning, which draws on technical knowledge and is aimed at task-oriented problem solving, and "communicative" learning, which draws on practical knowledge—understood in the Aristotelian sense as knowledge that has to do with acting correctly in a moral and political sense *(Wilson 2001)*—and is aimed at developing understanding about people's experiences, purposes, values, ideals, and feelings, as well as normative concepts like freedom, autonomy, justice, and responsibility *(Mezirow 1995)*. If the scholars who initiated the North Country and the Binghamton projects were functioning only as academic technicians, they would have limited their work to the

facilitation of instrumental learning (think of this as "how to do it" learning) and the "application" of already existing technical knowledge to the solving of technical problems. But because these scholars were also functioning as civic leaders and educators involved in problem setting, their work intentionally included the facilitation of communicative learning through various methods of deliberation, and beyond deliberation, taking action to realize the values and aims that were collectively embraced and developed through deliberative processes. In their problem-setting work, these scholars deliberately aimed to balance instrumental rationality with value rationality, helping individuals and organizations to think and act in value-rational terms (*Flyvbjerg 2001)*. The importance (and difficulty) of this work should not be underestimated in a "risk society" *(Beck 1992; Stern and Fineberg 1996; Beck, Adam, and Van Loon 2000)* where an embrace of an instrumental rationality has come to trump or even displace value rationality.

In short, the scholars who initiated each of these projects intentionally tried to shape them as action-oriented vehicles for both instrumental and communicative learning for all those involved, including the scholars. The search conferences held in the North Country Project facilitated both instrumental learning about how to deliberate about public issues, and communicative learning about people's values, interests, and ideals. The Binghamton Project facilitated instrumental learning about how to do neighborhood design and how to effectively engage city hall, while it also provided a vehicle for deliberation and action on neighborhood residents' vision of what their neighborhood could become.

In addition to being platforms for learning and action, each project functioned as a civic laboratory for constructing technical and practical knowledge relevant both to the citizens and groups the projects engaged and to the scholars' own academic disciplines. It is crucial to understand that much of this knowledge could not have been constructed any other way except through a process of collaborative civic engagement and public work.

In our interviews with them, we learned that Pelletier and Horrigan share a similar aim in their teaching and mentoring work with their students. Both of them intentionally try to teach more than just technical skills and knowledge relevant to their respective disciplines and professions. They also try to teach their students a civic orientation toward their disciplines and professions. The primary way they do this is not by lecturing about it, but by making space in their courses for students to explore and

discuss potential connections between their disciplines and professions and civic themes and issues, and—most importantly—by demonstrating it through their own work and inviting students to join with them. Horrigan does this through her senior community design studio and other projects. Pelletier does this through his courses, and through initiatives like the North Country Project. Two of Pelletier's graduate students who became involved in the North Country Project grounded their research on it, with one using it as the focus of her Ph.D. dissertation, and the other for her master's thesis.

It must be said that scholars who wish to embrace civic professionalism in their work and disciplines face serious barriers and disincentives. In both of the above practice stories, Pelletier's and Horrigan's decisions to chart and walk a path of civic professionalism and engagement placed them at odds with the dominant culture of detachment and disengagement in their disciplines and institutions. Although each has overcome this barrier—both Pelletier and achieved tenure—they continue to face pressures and disincentives that make their work and lives challenging.

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An additional barrier comes in the form of the politics and dynamics of institutional structures and forces, which (to put it mildly) are not always friendly to civic engagement and political action, and are not always willing to support or even allow work that moves beyond technical problem solving to deliberation over normative ideals and values. Additionally, as we learned from both Horrigan's and Pelletier's story, students can sometimes function as barriers by resisting messy, unpredictable, and open-ended learning experiences, wanting their professors to simply teach technical skills in straightforward ways rather than immerse them in difficult community-based experiences.

Finally, both of the stories reveal how difficult and time-consuming it is for scholars to embrace civic professionalism by becoming engaged in civic life. Horrigan mentioned the difficulty of her work several times in our interviews with her, saying that

she often feels like quitting and doing something easier, or going back to the mainstream way her discipline approaches teaching, which is a lot less messy and a lot less time consuming. Pelletier and his team traveled thirty thousand miles over two years, making a huge investment of time and energy that could have been avoided if he had taken a detached approach to his research and left out the civic engagement component. The challenge of practicing the civic arts and skills that deliberative democracy and public work require also functions as a barrier. These arts and skills—including such things as identifying and negotiating diverse interests, dealing with and developing power, and facilitating action-oriented dialogue—were not explicitly taught in these scholars' graduate programs, and have taken them substantial effort to acquire.

Prospects

I've shared here only the barest outlines of two practice stories of civic professionalism in academic life. Exploring these stories more fully by including more of their dimensions and conducting a deeper and more critical analysis of their many layers of meaning and significance would require a great deal more time and space. My aim in this paper, however, wasn't to present and discuss these stories in all their full complexity, but rather to suggest and illustrate an approach to pursuing the goals of the engagement movement that I believe measures up to Holland's standard more fully and deeply than does the approach described in Wood's proposal.

Rather than focusing on what's wrong with how Wood and other scholars are attempting to become engaged in civic life, it would be more productive for us to explore positive ideas, models, and stories that stimulate our imaginations about how scholars from a wide variety of disciplines and institutions might enter civic life in ways that allow them to contribute to both academic and civic interests. While I'm a committed pluralist who believes that there are and should be many, many ways to pursue this aim, I'm also committed to Holland's standard, which means (to me) that political activism alone does not and cannot add up to achieving our potential and meeting our obligations.

The reconstruction of civic professionalism in academic life at a level beyond which it exists today faces many serious obstacles, yet in my judgment its' prospects are good. The emerging engagement movement is providing both inspiration and momentum, and papers like Wood's are helping to stimulate thought and debate. I thank Wood for his efforts and hope that he will continue

his commitment to contribute as a scholar and teacher to civic life, taking time to reflect on the ways this commitment might be better and more fully realized.

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