

Youniss, J. & Levine, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Engaging Young People in Civic Life*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Review by Josh Krawczyk

Youniss and Levine's *Engaging Young People in Civic Life* assembles 13 essays and research findings that examine the perceived disengagement of American youth from civic and political processes. The collected works consider youth and public schools, their communities and municipalities, and policy recommendations, including an examination of international best practices. In compiling this collection, however, the editors seek not to perpetuate indictments of apathy and laziness of American youth, but instead take an asset-based approach, identifying ways to motivate and engage youth on their own terms, and to replicate successful engagement strategies demonstrated in recent election cycles.

This collection shows that the challenge of engaging young people in civic life is multifaceted and may not be addressed by any single recommendation, program, or policy; rather, multiple actors, including schools, communities, and governmental bodies, must actively seek to catalyze the interest and involvement of youth by recognizing their engagement potential and constructing customized efforts targeting youth specifically. Presumably, colleges and universities may be included in this list of critical actors. Where public schools and municipalities leave off, colleges and universities must pick up and continue addressing the challenge of engaging young people in civic life.

Although this volume focuses primarily on school-age youth, this aspect of the collection does not limit the volume's utility for higher education scholars and practitioners; rather, themes and recommendations that emerge may predict challenges and successes in higher education settings. Research in the text provides impetus for a paradigm shift for scholars and practitioners in higher education to better understand where their students come from in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and other factors. Intensified understanding of these factors will benefit curricular and cocurricular engagement efforts. Additionally, the volume includes policy recommendations at the local, state, federal, and even international levels, with broad implications for all educators.

The first section of the volume defines youth and barriers to their civic engagement, and the terms on which older

generations might successfully seek to engage these students. Rather than understanding youth through generational labels describing a collective set of inherent attitudes and characteristics, Youniss and Levine's opening chapter, "A 'Younger Americans Act': An Old Idea for a New Era," encourages scholars and practitioners in higher education to understand youth in terms of their engagement potential and to develop strategies to target them specifically. Factors such as quality of civic engagement opportunities provided by schools, the postsecondary educational plans of youth, and how both may be affected by student demographic characteristics are examined in Kahne and Middaugh's chapter, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School." Hess's chapter, "Principles That Promote Discussion of Controversial Political Issues in the Curriculum," demonstrates how institutional policies shape the terms upon which we successfully increase and improve youth engagement in civic life.

In the second section, Gimpel and Pearson-Merkowitz, in "Policies for Civic Engagement beyond the Schoolyard," explore partnerships and programs that target youth in order to demonstrate that public schools cannot be the only venue in which youth are trained and motivated for civic engagement. Hart and Kirshner's "Civic Participation and Development among Urban Adolescents" describes how and why neighborhoods and municipalities must take an equally active role in providing such opportunities, while Sirianni and Schor's "City Government as Enabler of Youth Civic Engagement: Policy Designs and Implications" recommends recognition and diffusion of historical tensions between citizens and government based on race and socioeconomic status, and inclusion of other community actors such as churches and activist youth groups as potential engagement vehicles. Finally, Shea's "Local Political Parties and Young Voters: Context, Resources, and Policy Innovation" calls for local political parties to be more active in targeting youth voter turnout through voter education and registration.

The last section of the book examines civic education and policy practices in other countries. Milner's "Youth Electoral Participation in Canada and Scandinavia" as well as Hooghe and Claes' "Civic Education in Europe: Comparative Policy Perspectives from the Netherlands, Belgium, and France" provide international comparisons of civic engagement policies and practice. The section concludes with an examination of the United Kingdom in Kerr and Cleaver's "Strengthening Education for Citizenship and Democracy in England: A Progress Report." These analyses describe a variety

of international practices, including compulsory voting, teacher training, and federal-level policies to improve youth engagement.

Themes that emerge in these essays identify barriers to youth engagement that result from historical racial tensions; the impact of socioeconomic status on opportunity and individual attitudes; and the lack of federal policy support for youth civic and community engagement. This volume went to press late in 2008, and thus does not include discussion of more recent federal legislation designed to promote and support community service, civic engagement, and access to higher education. For example, the [Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act](#) provides expanded support for volunteer corps under the coordination of the [Corporation for National Community Service](#). The bill increases federal incentives for support of volunteerism among youth, college students, and adults, and provides opportunities for more successful engagement of youth—as called for by Youniss and Levine and the other contributing authors.

The strength of the volume lies in its details. The research presented ranges from qualitative studies of the power dynamics of youth engagement to policy analysis of teacher training. The text focuses on high-school-age youth; however, colleges and universities will find utility in multiple elements. Practitioners and scholars may be encouraged to move beyond the deficit-based paradigm of youth civic engagement to a more complete understanding of how youth are motivated to political engagement, and to more successful engagement strategies as a result. Instructors and staff may design experiences that appeal to youth in new ways and measure success accordingly; for example, these experiences may include expanding scope and depth of partnerships with local community groups and governments. The design of these experiences, either within courses or as cocurricular experiences, should include consideration of historical tensions, as well as the impact of the socioeconomic status of all participants in the experience, including students and the community partners.

In short, higher education scholars and practitioners may use the research in this text to reshape their understanding of how to more successfully engage students in civic life, and to better prepare themselves to provide meaningful, informed learning environments. Young people currently attending colleges and universities, or about to graduate from high school, constitute a large national group with high potential for positive civic impact. Higher education can help them realize this potential by meeting them more on their terms.

About the Reviewer

Josh Krawczyk is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at Oklahoma State University, as well as a Senior Academic Advisor. His research interests include retention and remediation policy in higher education, transformational learning, and university and community engagement.

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