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Book Review: Should the Higher Education Community Help Sustain Democracy?

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Should the Higher Education Community Help Sustain Democracy?

Reviewed by Margaret A. Purcell

Scott J. Peters, Theodore R. Alter, and Neil Schwartzbach, *Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civic Engagement*. Michigan State University Press: East Lansing, 2010, 396 pages. ISBN: 978-0-87013-976-5

Practicing public purpose is done in a variety of ways, with a multitude of publics, and with the aim of impacting communities. Ever present in this text are the underlying assumptions that: Members of higher education communities can and should impact their worlds; neither theory nor practice are best served by operating in isolation of one another; democracy will never flourish in a world where the educated function without exposure to the checks and balances of daily life. Personal interviews with engagement scholars and practitioners allow the authors to illustrate the vast opportunities for building community and enhancing theory through engagement.

The authors cite the conclusions of President Truman's 1948 Commission on Higher Education as the foundation for their arguments that academic theory building and education must go outside the hallways, laboratories, and classrooms of our colleges and universities in order to sustain a functioning democratic society. The often clinically untainted experience of teaching and learning must occur in concert with the struggles, joys, and mundane realities that constitute living. The student, the teacher, and the community interacting together with the community are able to explore and assist with civic life. The authors underscore their assertions by highlighting the work of faculty and staff at Cornell University.

The authors follow a trend in the community engagement literature that posits a high value for outreach and outreach scholarship. Cunningham and McKinney (2010) argued that deliberative democracy, applied learning, and community engagement can result in: 1) increased participation of communities in faculty research; 2) the willful participation of faculty in community outreach; and 3) greater student understanding of practice. By combining learning, service, and research, a synchronous system of theory, practice, and partnership emerges. This requires us to veer away from what Rice (1996) called the "assumptive world of the academic professional" which requires adherence to specifically defined standards of rigor, dissemination, and peer review (O'Meara, 2008). Through the profiles in the Peters, Alter, and Schwartzbach text, we are witness to a vivid picture of the struggles that practitioners face as their attempt to work sometimes within and sometimes beyond the existing rigid structure of higher education. Perhaps more importantly, it gives witness to the powerful impact that can be made when the rigid structure is allowed to become malleable. In such instances the skills and interests of university personnel and students intertwine with the needs and resources of the community in dynamic and mutually beneficial ways.

Other literature indicates that citizenship education (broadly defined) is also impactful to the communities in which such targeted education occurs. The viability of public civic education is seen as a value to the greater society beyond the world of higher education. According to the Citizenship Foundation (2012) citizenship education is successful when it teaches participants to be:

- Aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens
- Informed about the social and political world
- Concerned about the welfare of others
- Articulate in their opinions and arguments

- Capable of having an influence on the world
- Active in their communities
- Responsible in how they act as citizens.

O'Meara (2008) argued that community dependent faculty must be able to engage community partners and secure their trust in order to be effective. She stressed that faculty should have the ability to: discover and learn, think critically, consider and appreciate various values; recognize diverse perspectives; reflect upon experience and theory; share outcomes and paradigms with lay and academic audiences; and integrate scholarly perspectives with real world practice. All of these tenets are seen in the profiles of this text.

The people profiled are real—and sometimes raw—examples of how the hiring, firing, and reward systems in higher education espouse ambiguous messages about how to excel. There are expressions of the reality of the tenuous nature of the work as when senior extension associate Tom Maloney must wait to see if he will have his appointment renewed and when associate professor John Sipple worries that his work will not be valued by his academic peers on his promotion and tenure committee. Those profiled state that they struggled with the fluxing valuation given over time to service, then education, then research—as if they were discrete units without shared function or purpose. There is an acknowledgement that the reliance on external funding sources can lead to breaks in service and difficulty in planning for future work. Will grant funding continue? Will the university continue the staff line? Will research topics and teaching loads be viewed as acceptable? Are service and outreach valued within higher education?

Then there are questions of accepted pedagogy. Is service-learning teaching? Does it have measurable and significant impacts on student learning? Existing literature posits rich and lifelong affects of service-learning. According to King and Baxter-Magolda (1996) self-authorship and personal authority are essential to learning in the higher education setting. Self and other knowledge must be understood by learners, and the service-learning format requires that a student understand both. This outcome is highly desirable, according to the Association of American Colleges (1991), which insists that institutions must help students understand that the world is highly complex and that understanding is based upon interpretation of available information. The experience is potent for the student because it changes the student's relation

to the academic power structure (Butin, 2005). The student becomes an actor upon and within the realm of knowledge instead of a recipient of existing knowledge, according to Butin.

These outcomes are reinforced by profiled subjects. In the text, associate professor Paula Horrigan clearly articulates her passion for student engagement when she shares that “I’m interested in fostering ... democratic practices and engagement, and co-learning” (p. 121). Students are key components of a communal process. “You put them in a situation where revelation comes to them because of experience, not because you tell them,” she says (p. 121). She notes that the experience in such a learning setting prepares students for future work in communities.

Learning can also be empowering as indicated by profile subject and associate professor Frank Rossi. He says that he intends to instill the instinct to question in the professionals with whom he works. He provides the latest information on horticulture chemicals to the community, but he wants them to ask how their use will impact their real world settings and their work. He works hard to link his state of the art research as a scientist to real world problems, and he strives to make his presentations understandable and useful in the community at large. He is a powerful facilitator of knowledge because he conveys information and encourages recipients to question then use what is learned within their setting.

This text is an excellent jumping off point for honest and open conversations about the role of higher education in our communities and civic life. What is our purpose and how should we function to reach our goals? This highly accessible text with modern day profiles in courage is a good place to begin to explore how we should value theory building, community education, community partnerships, and learning. As institutions and the people who embody them, are we passive conveyers of thought or nimble, responsive, active, vital members of democratic and engaged communities of lifelong learners?

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About the Reviewer

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