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Book Review: Engaged Research as a Tool for Change at Different Levels

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Engaged Research as a Tool for Change at Different Levels

**Reviewed by Amanda Wittman
Cornell University**

Betty Overton, Penny A. Pasque, and John C. Burkhardt (Eds.), *Engaged Research and Practice: Higher Education and the Pursuit of the Public Good*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2017, 326 pages. ISBN: 978-1-620364-40-6.

I started reading *Engaged Research and Practice* expecting to learn new frameworks to support engaged research and learn from case studies about the practical application of such frameworks. And while this exists, in excellent ways, what I found instead was a primer on using engaged research as a tool for change: change at partnership, institutional, and policy levels. Through an in-depth look at The National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good (The National Forum) as a strategy to redirect scholarship about higher education “to guide strategies that might eliminate barriers to access, systemic inequality, problems associated with increasing corporatization, and declining public support for education” (p. 23), this book made me ask questions about scaling change efforts, institutionalizing change, and the role of engaged research in the fundamental work of community engagement to promote and support change.

In our efforts at Cornell University to re-orient the university to its founding principles of “knowledge with a public purpose,” we spend a lot of time thinking about change. We discuss transactional and transformational change, scalability of change mechanisms, student learning as evidence of individual’s change, and faculty networks as loci of culture change. And sometimes, though we draw on evidence and research about these topics, these conversations can lead me to feeling like we are in a vacuum, with few guideposts along the way. Into that vacuum, Overton, Pasque, and Burkhardt have stepped, and strung together a collection of chapters that provides clear signs for others to follow.

As a bit of an organizational systems nerd, I found the first two chapters, “Engagement for the Common Good” and “Scholarship and Activism on Behalf of Higher Education’s Public Good Mission,” to be fruitful discussions of how to set up an initiative within the academy with a social movement orientation at its core. From definitional considerations to organizational context,

these chapters should help any group that identifies as a change unit within their home institution.

Part Two, “Engaging the Community Level,” forces the reader to reconsider the ways that we set up research partnerships. The section provides constant reminders that how we set these up *organizationally* matters—reciprocity and collaboration are not just values of engaged research, but are daily practices and choices to be made. The National Forum itself was founded in an ethic of sustainable, community social change, and in this section, the authors and the researchers work through how that manifests itself through specific research related to a civil rights organization and a young people’s educational opportunity network. Pasque’s chapter on “Collaborative Approaches to Community Change” fits well at this point, providing the theoretical support to contextualize the previous chapters.

The questions that open Part Three, “Engaging the Institutional Level,” ask “How do colleges and universities engage with society? How might colleges and universities pursue social problems to ignite social transformation around fundamental matters of inclusion” (p. 109); these made me sit up and think “now we’re getting to it.” The authors in this section are committed to looking at the academy as a potential catalyst for change, but are clear-eyed about the challenges this poses. I found Southern, Wisell, and Casner-Lotto’s chapter focused on the community college especially informative, with practical strategies gleaned from engaged research with educational leaders who are at the forefront of addressing the unique contexts posed by immigrant students.

Part Four, “Engaging Policy Discussions at the State and National Levels,” explores The National Forums’ efforts to share the results of their engaged research efforts to influence institutional and public policy. Reyes, Kamimura, and Southern provide another useful organizational narrative of creating and sustaining a change initiative, this time with a specific advocacy approach to help advance the

public good mission of colleges and universities. Martinez and Duan-Barnett both illustrate how research findings can help reframe institutional state-level policies. These chapters all confirm the overall thrust of the book, that engaged research —when done well—supports change efforts in meaningful ways.

I have left my favorite aspect of the book to last: the reflective narratives that are stitched throughout the sections. These are individual student reflections that add depth and interest to the overall book, and carry with them the weight of the impact of The National Forum's work.

While I was pleasantly surprised by the underlying themes of change, this could have been made more explicit in the early stages of the book. And at times the two-pronged approach of showcasing examples of engaged research alongside the more theoretical chapters was jarring to read. However, the questions this book raises and its clear usefulness as a guide to thinking through key elements

of social change initiatives on campus and in research lead me to recommend it to administrators, scholars, and students for whom the questions of scalable change resonate. This volume will certainly provide productive road signs to follow.

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About the Reviewer

Amanda Wittman is an associate director in the Office of Engagement Initiatives at Cornell University where she supports faculty, graduate students, and staff interested in developing and deepening community-engaged teaching and research. Her PhD is in political science and international relations from the University of Edinburgh.