

September 2021

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Recommended Citation

Shaffer, Timothy J. (2021) "Leadership for Better Understanding and Advancement Of Civic Engagement in Higher Education," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 20. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol14/iss1/20>

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Leadership for Better Understanding and Advancement Of Civic Engagement in Higher Education

**Reviewed by Timothy J. Shaffer
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William V. Flores and Katrina S. Rogers (Eds.). (2019). *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education: Reclaiming Our Civic Purpose*. Lexington Books. 410 pages. ISBN: 978-1498590945

This review had a long journey. I began it not long after receiving Flores and Rogers's book, shortly following its publication in 2019. We are now shaped by nearly two years of a global pandemic that influenced education and our thinking about many aspects of our lives and institutions. We are living in a world we did not anticipate but must navigate. In many ways, we are still somewhere along a journey to what will come in the future, even though we would like to think we are beyond much of the uncertainty. And in other ways, we are unmoored at the very moment when we need anchoring. We could speak about our global society in this way, but it becomes especially salient when we focus on higher education.

Following decades of declining trust in "governing institutions" as David Mathews (2020, p. 1) of the Kettering Foundation notes, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the role, importance, and challenges of such institutions. In his own contribution to this volume, Mathews asks, "So what has to be done to better align the work of colleges and universities with the work of citizens?" His suggested response is not extreme, but it is significant: "Alignment should be accomplished by academics doing what they normally do—just a bit differently" (p. 61). It is this subtle shift, a readjustment and realignment, that is found throughout the volume. Replete with chapters that read as (good) extended vignettes, the authors have done a commendable job highlighting the experiments of democracy in classrooms, communities, and their institutions' administrative structures.

In recent months, there have been multiple stories of colleges and universities closing. The closure of private liberal arts institutions such as Concordia College and Becker College and the merging of Mills College with Northeastern University highlights the challenge of appealing to certain geographical or niche populations. And while some legislatures are recognizing the very serious challenges facing public higher education, others are proposing cuts that will

have long-lasting impacts well beyond their own tenures. It is within this context that I write this review and am stuck on the text's introduction and its title: "Higher Education Responds to the New Crisis in Democracy." As I read in the text about concerns regarding the 2016 presidential election with the 2020 election and subsequent events such as January 6, 2021, on my mind, I am torn between full agreement about the increasingly flawed state of democracy in the United States and beyond (p. 2) and the sense that we have seen much of this before.

In 1946, President Harry Truman formed a commission of scholars that would eventually produce *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education* (1948). Within a chapter entitled "The Social Role of Higher Education," the report noted that "American colleges and universities must envision a much larger role for higher education in the national life." These institutions could no longer see themselves as "producing an intellectual elite" and must "become the means by which every citizen... is enabled and encouraged" to utilize both formal and informal education in their lives (The President's Commission on Higher Education, 1948, p. 101). The report continued:

The wider diffusion of more education, however, will not serve that purpose unless that education is better adapted to contemporary needs. The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all its levels and in all its fields of specialization it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and processes. (The President's Commission on Higher Education, 1948, p. 102)

These concerns expressed more than 70 years ago reverberate today. Significantly, democratic dimensions of higher education have eroded sharply since the time of the report. As Harry Boyte (2010) notes:

Though there have been many civic engagement efforts in higher education in recent years, they have not made much of a dent in the forces that are turning higher education into a private good, a system with a few winners and many losers. (p. xiii)

Put more bluntly, “In an unsettling contrast to the ideals espoused by [the] President’s Commission on Higher Education, today’s expectations are focused on individual returns from higher education as a means to drive the economy” (Hutcheson, 2007, p. 367). With these important arguments in mind, *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education* contributes to the ongoing work of making higher education an important governing and educational institution in democracy, a particularly important endeavor in the context of this ongoing shift from education as a public good to education as a disseminator of personal credentials.

Flores and Rogers have edited a book grounded within the long history of higher education’s civic mission as well as the intellectual tradition that has shaped the most recent phases of this work.¹ Significantly, they have created space for voices that are often absent from calls for greater civic impact and relevance—college and university presidents. Presidents may be viewed skeptically as perennial fundraisers who are detached from the faculty and support staff who actually embody civic engagement, but it is university and college presidents who “forge partnerships with community organizations, seek funding from foundations for support of broad community engagement efforts, and through the ‘bully pulpit’ of the presidency can reward and recognize scholars who[se] transformative work advance[s] democratic citizenship” (p. 15). If the founding of Campus Compact in 1985 by the presidents of Brown, Stanford, and Georgetown Universities and the presidents of the Education Commission of the United States can serve as a reminder, the growth and maturation of the movement to “reinvigorate the civic purposes of higher education [began] in the mid-1980s” was made possible because of presidential commitments that aligned with many grassroots voices (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 10). Presidents were not the only ones calling for greater

democratic roles for colleges and universities, but they had the positional authority to make strategic investments in personnel and resources that made it possible for faculty, staff, and students to engage with peers through the various networks that have animated this field (Hartley, 2011, p. 33ff). Sean Creighton (Chapter 4) offers a closer look at how these networks and associations benefit not only specific institutions but also entire regions through civic leadership.

Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education is composed of five sections, each offering perspectives on the challenges facing universities and colleges, primarily through the voices of presidents. It would be easy for people in such positions to offer platitudes about civic missions, commitments, and identities. Strikingly and refreshingly so, the contributions from presidents offer honorable and powerful stories about how they sought to institutionalize civic engagement efforts among students, faculty, and staff. This work, it should be noted, was not always welcomed. It strikes me that this volume’s most important contribution to the literature is that it comes *from the top* and still shares similarities with the work of scholars and practitioners who are critical of administrators’ supposed disconnect from the classroom or community. The text is not devoid of sweeping statements or overly ambitious claims, but at a moment of democratic reckoning in the United States and beyond, it is important for leaders to double down on their commitments to democratic practices, and civic engagement in all of its forms should be fundamentally imagined as building and cultivating democratic life on and off campus. Service-learning, deliberation, or any other effort cannot be thought of as an end in itself; these efforts must represent institutional commitments to both democratic society and active and informed citizenship. If presidents can speak in this way, all the better.

The relevance is striking, especially now, as we think about how higher education can and should play a role in responding to the many crises we face. David Wilson, president of Morgan State University, offers an important reminder of what higher education *can* do. Highlighting the role of Morgan State and other historically Black colleges and universities, Wilson reminds us that the fight for and commitment to something like “democracy” isn’t an empty concept. Similarly,

¹ A good, brief overview of the intellectual terrain they traverse in this book—exploring civic engagement, public deliberation, and democratic practices—can be found on p. 13ff.

Otto Lee and Kevin Drumm, presidents of Los Angeles Harbor College and SUNY Broome Community College, respectively, write about the unique ways in which these institutions came to embrace civic missions, since they are seen primarily/exclusively as having an “access mission” (p. 191). The interconnections among education, civic mission, and economic impact allow community colleges to stay *committed to and truly be* stewards of place while ensuring that a student-first approach aligning these elements is beneficial to all involved.

In the final section of the text, we hear from a range of center directors on engaged campuses. These chapters remind readers what presidential commitments and aspirations can mean in practice. Examples from the University of Houston-Downtown, the University of Texas at El Paso, Tulane University, Colorado State University, and Augsburg College highlight the range of institutions in which public deliberation and dialogue intersect with other forms of engaged teaching, learning, and research. If you are a president seeking to better integrate these elements, or if you are someone advocating for this type of work to *your* president, these chapters demonstrate the tangible end results of making this work an institutional priority.

Finally, the conclusion by Flores and Rogers is a strikingly helpful article, especially for those with influence—whether they are presidents or not. Flores and Rogers offer 10 recommendations central to the themes of this volume that warrant inclusion here: (a) embrace the importance of leadership; (b) raise your voice; (c) investigate and expand your institution’s community engagement efforts; (d) affirm the commitment of you and your institution to the civic purpose; (e) undertake public deliberation on important issues; (f) support civically engaged faculty and staff; (g) support your students; (h) promote a campus culture of civic involvement, voter registration, and voting; (i) review your curriculum to embed democratic values and practices; and (j) forge sustainable partnerships (pp. 361–369). The beauty of this volume is that the various chapters help readers better understand the field of higher education civic engagement and how presidents can help advance these democratic efforts to build a more civically oriented society by educating students to be active, informed, and engaged citizens.

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