Community Engagement in Higher Education: Policy Reforms and Practice

Jacob, W. James; Sutin, Steward E.; Weidman, John C.; and Yeager, John L., eds.
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Book Review

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Towards the end of their introductory chapter, the editors of *Community Engagement in Higher Education* succinctly state the broad concern holding the volume together: "More emphasis should be made to link teaching and research with community initiatives" (17). The remaining seventeen chapters show what this can look like across a variety of higher education institutions, from community colleges to urban universities and from regional systems to global partnerships. Though divided into three parts – thematic issues, U.S., and international cases – the basic approach throughout the volume is descriptive case study written by persons with firsthand knowledge of the specific program or community engagement initiative. So, for example, contributors to part one raise "thematic issues" by reflecting on particular cases of the role of technology in enhancing university-community partnerships or service learning in disaster recovery. Similarly, scholars in parts two and three identify thematic issues in their interrogation of case studies focused on sustainable partnerships or the limits of current institutional commitments to critical community engagement.

The subtitle of the book, "Policy Reforms and Practice," suggests a more robust discussion of the way forward. However, most of the authors focus on their own institutional practices, relegating the larger questions of education policy reform to brief historical overviews of policies (such as the Morrill Act) and commissions (for example, the Kellogg Commission) that have served to legitimate the community engagement role of higher education. Given the parochial focus of individual chapters, the absence of a concluding, forward-looking synthesis chapter is conspicuous – even more so given the increasingly narrow metrics employed to measure the value of higher education institutions and persistent suspicion about the value-added of service learning.

As many of the chapters remind readers, community engagement is not new, and many institutions support a range of initiatives. But therein lies the rub. In one of the strongest chapters – theoretically and practically – Seth Pollack critiques the "pedagogification" of service learning, a process through which service learning becomes primarily a method for teaching traditional content, rather than an "epistemologically transformative educational practice" aimed at forming students for critical civic engagement (170). Pollack's chapter stands out as one of the few in the volume to find the sweet spot in case study research, using the case to illustrate theory and theory to illumine both the case and the wider social context in which the case is situated. Unfortunately, many of the other chapters do little more than report out on initiatives in which the authors played a significant role. As a result, the volume struggles to assert critical leverage in two important ways: self-critique and social critique. That is, the chapters would benefit, on the one hand, from a bit more critical distance from the programs discussed and, on the other hand, from critique of the wider social forces and structures that significantly shape the societal fault lines along which most community engagement initiatives are carried out.

Taken together, the various case studies suggest that two challenges consistently threaten the success of community engagement: (1) alignment of both resources and vision between a large educational institution and diverse community stakeholders and (2) integration of the community engagement function into the identity of the university. A fair amount has been written in the past five years about the role of universities as anchor institutions, or institutions that are embedded in a particular place and committed to leveraging their resources and the community's assets for community development, neighborhood revitalization, and so forth. The discussion of anchor institutions has catalyzed a conversation about both of the pressing challenges noted above, offering up a way to think about community engagement as more than just one-off service learning experiences or the aggregate of individual student volunteer hours. Yet, the volume has little to say about this current conversation.

I looked forward to this volume, in part because we had just begun a conversation about how our small, religiously affiliated university could be a better neighbor to those in and around our campus. For those teaching religion and theology, such conversations are opportunities to draw from the deep well of religious reflection on who our neighbor is and what our obligations to one another might be – individually and as institutions. This conversation is not on the radar for the contributors in this volume, an omission that may have to do with the particular interlocutors in the *Pittsburgh Studies in Comparative and International Education* book series of which this book is a part. (The case studies are drawn primarily from public institutions, with the exception of a chapter on Duquesne University.) Yet religiously affiliated universities are often located in urban centers facing considerable challenges or negotiating

difficult transformations. And these institutions articulate a purpose that, in mission statements, at least, resonates with the distinctive moral arc of public serving universities in the United States. These colleges and universities are also often anchors in many small town and rural communities, both of which merit more attention than is afforded in this book (as well as in the broader community engagement literature).

I would be remiss if I didn't mention one final concern: the appearance of sloppy scholarship in many of the chapters, beginning in the editors' introduction. Issues include misidentifying the town in which a university is located, to quotations without citations, to grammatical errors. These could, perhaps, be dismissed as the collateral damage of publishing in an era with limited copy editing support. However, in light of the constant need many of us feel to defend community engagement and service learning as rigorous, such writing style concerns bear additional weight insofar as they detract from the credibility of those whose commitment to scholarship for social change can – and should – be a catalyst for revitalizing the service mission of higher education institutions.

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