

BOOK REVIEW:

Reframing Community Engagement in Higher Education

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On April 2, 2024, senior staff members of the Division of Campus and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin were called to brief individual meetings with the vice president of human resources. Some of us were laid off, and many of us were assigned to new units. We were all told, however, that our intellectual, cultural, and emotional home—the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement—would shutter. Despite the heart-rending work of successfully excising issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging from the work of 50 student-facing units focused on that work for over 15 years and continuing to serve the beautiful panoply of students while also being in absolute compliance with anti-diversity/equity/inclusion state legislation, we were out of business.

It is in this context that I read a critical new text on our broad field of community engagement, *Reframing Community Engagement in Higher Education*, edited by Elena Klaw, Andrea Tully, and Elaine K. Ikeda (2024). The context in which they assembled this volume is a different moment of rupture; specifically, the stories of this volume emerge from the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd, along with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Organized into three parts outlining current contexts of engagement, how to establish infrastructure, and reconceptualizing roles, this volume presents stories of engagement that establish an urgency for engagement work to be nimble and to “never waste a crisis” (p. 3). Written by those who bring their whole selves to their work, I was reminded of the service of Santana and colleagues in assembling the practitioner-focused volume, *Anti-Racist Community Engagement* (Stylus, 2023). As an invited contributor to that volume, my community partner co-authors and I toyed with various written formats until we decided to finally let ourselves speak freely; our resulting chapter (Gururaj et al., 2023) about our *Front Porch Gatherings* is a series of first-person narratives.

The first-person narratives in *Reframing* heighten the message of asset-based community engagement; in re-visioning the potential of community engagement after a time of massive change and crisis, we need to assess the strengths in our growing field. Indebted to Lina D. Dostilio’s “competency model for an emerging field”, the authors featured in this volume understand themselves to be “change-oriented leaders, using their positions within the middle spaces of their organizations to catalyze change and greater realization of postsecondary education’s civic purpose” (Dostilio, 2017, p. 2). Along with cited theoretical frameworks and examples of practice, these chapters include narratives of the positionalities of the authors and the ways they made their way to this

field. What results is an incredible tapestry of stories demonstrating what we in community engagement know to be true: our field is strengthened by its diversity of story, of experience, and of purpose.

This volume doesn't demand to be read cover-to-cover; indeed the sections, and the inclusion of robust literature reviews in each chapter, enable the reader to use the volume as a reference guide. As a unit, it calls for reliance on people and collaborative networks. Co-editor Ikeda is a leader in our field, and in recounting her perspective as the head of LEAD California, she emphasizes coalition-building for capacity building even as institutions silo community engagement in either student affairs or academic affairs (p. 106). Most of the chapters, too, emphasize the critical need for deliberate dialogue to be effective in engagement, seemingly predicting the current moment in which institutions are re-teaching (or just teaching) students how to hold a productive and respectful conversation.

Particularly notable in this moment are the chapters that minimize the often assumed primacy of R1 public institutions in promoting effective community engagement. Robinson and Robinson exalt the public mission of (local, regional) community colleges, appropriate in this time of deep distrust of national higher education. Because democratic engagement is "least understood, valued, and practiced by individuals whose needs are most ignored" (p. 64), community colleges play a unique role in provisioning students with the economic, social, and political capital to participate in this democracy. This is the promise of effective community engagement: to serve the communities in which institutions are anchored. Like community colleges, faith-based institutions may strengthen their roles as locales of engagement. Yamamura, Koth, and Nayve offer that strong presidential leadership may elevate the roles of faith-based institutions in our work. In states where religion influences the structures and processes of public K-20 education, faith-based institutions may emerge as facilitators of engagement.

Even as unique institution types recommit to their stakeholders, community-engaged champions should recommit to our collective work. Klaw, Ngo, Mjia, Sandy, and Levisohn underscore this idea in pointing to a perspective not often included alongside practitioners: that of engaged faculty. They describe not only their positionalities but also the frustration of having to be over-cognizant of "crossing the line into advocacy" (p. 193). For community engagement professionals, walking this line is a way of life, and we are sometimes at odds with faculty members who want more freedom in the work. However, now, as faculty councils and faculty work are threatened, this volume has provided a service by aligning the voices of practitioners and faculty; alignment-as-coalition is our work now.

Indeed, our sector is becoming more connected through coalitions and conveners like Campus Compact, Engaged Scholarship Consortium, American Council on Education (ACE), International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), and so many others. APLU's Commission on Economic and Community Engagement seeks to emphasize the all-important public purposes of the higher education sector in its forthcoming update to *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution* (1999). But, this volume also finds value in the individual, the family, and the local. Ducar and Ellerbee write about the important role of hyperlocal engagement (p. 224) in an evolving community engagement strategy. While community engagement may need to become more nimble as a field, our commitment to our local communities should not change at all.

It's true that the co-editors emphasize the local; Californian authors and institutions are heavily represented. One wonders how these frameworks and practices that are rooted in diversity/equity/inclusion might find their way (and, now, their way back) to other more centrist or conservative states.

In fact, I was wistful reading these chapters that told of how mission-driven professionals developed strategies to address threats to equity—reminders that felt especially poignant in today's context. Now that we've returned to the normalcy of a time before Covid-19 and entered an era in which authoritarian leadership has infiltrated all parts of civic life, I'm reminded of what happened after my work division was disbanded. Our senior leaders, some out of a job, met weekly to organize our shared files and to reassign files to existing staff members. We entrusted our real and virtual archives to forward-thinking university librarians. We enacted the simple behavior of all long-standing communities: save the artifacts, so that when we return to the calm of our public work, we can re-create our libraries as resources for this work.

This book is one such library, holding the hopes for the past and future of our field. Though the editors and authors of this collection speak repeatedly about the “founders” of our community engagement field, they are in fact part of the “second generation of engagement, or what could be referred to as the *new frontier* ... a collective, and more importantly ... a profession” (Dostilio, 2017, p. 21). In doing so, they are themselves founts of deep wisdom in a time of great tumult. We may suffer setbacks, but our (re)vision is clear.

References

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Author Bio

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