BOOK REVIEW

Avila, M. *Transformative civic engagement through community organizing*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2018, 136 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1620361047, Paperback.

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Now and again a book is published in the field of civic and community engagement that, at first glance, appears unassuming because of its length. It would be a mistake to overlook Maria Avila's *Transformative Civic Engagement Through Community Organizing* as such a text, which in only 100 pages packs as much wisdom as any edited research series or co-written book that I have read thus far. I was drawn to review Avila's work because, first and foremost, we do not often see a published Latina author in our field. Additionally, as a Latina with a long lineage of community organizers in my own family, I was intrigued by Avila's approach to university community engagement through an organizing lens. I chose this book with the hopes that I would hear the echoes of my own work in the service learning–community engagement field. I was not disappointed.

The strength of this book begins with Avila squarely placing herself as *researcher-as-instrument* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019); as an active respondent in the research process, who brings with this approach her history as a Mexican immigrant; as an Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) organizer; and eventually as a faculty member at a major university. Avila provides a crash course in the history of the IAF and its purpose. For those who, like me, were familiar with IAF (my aunt and uncle were both IAF-trained organizers), the connection Avila makes early on between her history as a community organizer and her work as a civically engaged scholar was a revelation. Like Avila, I came to academia after years as a professional journalist and public school teacher, but I never fully embraced the identity of the *scholar* or *researcher*. When I began—through my reading of Avila's background—to think of myself as a *community organizer*, it was as if the light had suddenly been shed on a long-held secret.

Avila's main focus in this book is how community organizing practices and approaches strengthen and solidify community engagement activities. She begins with a discussion around student volunteerism and other transactional approaches often seen in university settings and explains how her own training as an IAF community organizer has strengthened the work that she has done within the academy, both at Occidental University, where she served as the inaugural director of its community engagement center, and as a visiting scholar at Maynooth University in Ireland, where she facilitated faculty development activities through a community organizing approach. She is careful not to simply dismiss the myriad ways in which faculty and students engage with cam-

pus partners. Her goal, rather, is to highlight the ways in which she was successful in transformative community change as a professional community organizer and how, as an academic, she utilizes community organizing skills and processes to effect change within her own institutional contexts.

Chapter 2 of *Transformative Civic Engagement Through Community Organizing* provides a rich and practical overview of community organizing tactics and how they serve as a productive strategy to co-creation and co-assessment of community-based activities by all stakeholders, faculty, students, and community partners. She outlines several assumptions she makes in her work, in particular at Occidental, which includes the premise that the college is, in and of itself, a community in need of transformation just as much as are (if not more than) external partners and communities. This premise guides Avila's discussion of not only how we as academics negotiate our partnerships with external stakeholders but also how these activities require us to continuously assess how we are internally changing our own organization.

The four organizing practices Avila highlights are (a) one-on-one meetings, (b) building a collective of leaders, (c) understanding and using power, and (d) ongoing critical reflection. Avila intentionally relates how community organizing and academic approaches to service-learning relationships often overlap. What is unique in community organizing, however, is the slow approach to the work, something that is often not feasible for faculty who are bound by time limits such as semesters and tenure clocks. She acknowledges this limitation throughout her writing but argues that by using these four approaches, we improve the likelihood that our work will have long-term lasting effects on our communities, our students, and ourselves.

Addressing concerns of sustainability and institutional barriers while conducting institutional capacity building for community engagement, Avila suggests that a community organizing approach can serve institutions of higher education, as well. Beginning with one-on-one meetings with a broad array of stakeholders, Avila argues, allows us to build lasting relationships and deep understanding of people's self-interest. These more intimate and free-form discussions also allow us to find synergies with our self-interests, which helps all stakeholders map collective goals. Within these meetings, Avila echoes Alinsky's (1971) preference for probing and agitation, getting to the root matters—and barriers—of the work and challenging the fixed mindsets that often derail even the best intentions. The second practice, building a collective of leaders, also holds in it sparkling nuggets of wisdom, especially for those who, like me, tend to heap the responsibility for all things upon our own shoulders. Identifying potential leaders early on not only trains future leaders on a project but exponentially improves its chances of success.

Step three, understanding and using power, rings familiar in our practice, as power dynamics between faculty and students, researchers and community partners, faculty and administrators, and project leaders and gatekeepers (such as funders) can easily sidetrack a well-laid plan. Power analysis also, Avila says, provides an opportunity to "examine and understand the web of relationships we need to build, as well as to understand challenges and opportunities for our engagement work" (p. 29). Step four, ongoing and critical reflection, is a required practice for service-learning and community-engaged teaching courses, providing opportunity for students to connect their learning with the work they are doing in the community as well as, and more importantly, for all stakeholders to reflect upon their positionality in this quest for transformative change. In Avila's IAF practices, she states

that reflection is “essential” in four areas: (a) evaluation in meeting goals, (b) power checks and evolving dynamics between stakeholders, (c) accountability, both individually and as a collective, and (d) a self-interest check, to ensure that self-interests are in alignment with the collective goals and vision for change.

The final chapters of the book highlight Avila’s work at Maynooth and Occidental as well as at California State University–Dominguez Hills as a tenure-track faculty member. Avila weaves the story of how she utilized community organizing practices in these very different contexts and how these practices laid the foundation for ongoing and sustainable success within each institution. Readers will find similarities in their own institutional paths, as I did. I felt my colleagues and I accomplished a great deal, and yet at moments I felt I had left my leadership position, stepping down from administration and returning to faculty work, and the work was not fully complete. In the end, however, I found encouragement in her argument that we must “ground our own narratives” (p. 89) and recognize that this respite is not an end but an opportunity for us, our colleagues, and our institutions to step back and reflect upon the work that has been completed to make room and carve a path for next steps. Culture change within and beyond the institution is “slow work” (p. 83), as Avila argues, but work well worth the time and effort.

References

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