Not since the time of John Dewey has so much critical attention been directed at the civic responsibilities of American institutions of higher learning. This renewed scrutiny has three main sources. First is the cascade of statistical evidence documenting a seemingly bottomless disaffection with politics and public affairs among successive cohorts of college students. Second is a quickening trickle of dissatisfaction among the faculty, a growing sense that relentless pressure to publish instigates far too much research that is as irrelevant to important issues of the day as it is disconnected from timeless questions of the ages. Third is a freshet of philanthropy to support applied projects that attempt to (re)connect institutions of higher learning to the larger communities in which they are embedded. Campus-based community service is caught up in these currents. In little more than a decade its emphasis has shifted from extracurricular charitable service to "service-learning"—that is, community service that also intentionally promotes academic learning—to "civic engagement." The multiple meanings of that last term, and how community service can promote it among college students in all (or at least many) disciplines, is the subject of this slim yet insightful monograph by Rick Battistoni.

Battistoni begins by reviewing briefly the evidence of a "crisis" in civic education and higher education’s response to that crisis. Not counting the uncountable progression of committees, task forces, and blue-ribbon panels that engage in much hand wringing and speechifying, the most common strategy for "stemming the tide of civic disengagement" favored by college presidents has been to endorse (and even fund, to varying degrees) efforts to place more students in community-based service activities. The key question, of course, is whether that strategy makes sense: can service-learning in fact promote civic engagement?

Battistoni’s considered reply to that question is in the affirmative—but not without some caveats. He demonstrates convincingly that both the question and its answer are more complicated than many of service-learning’s champions may be willing to admit. For one thing, there is the troublesome fact that college students’ expressed interest and involvement in public affairs has plummeted just as their participation in school-organized community service has reached all-time highs. Of course, gross trends can conceal as much as they reveal, and one can always speculate about how much worse the “crisis” in civic disengagement would be the emphasis on community service. Even so, that all the time, money, and effort poured into campus-based community service programs has thus far been unaccompanied by any detectable upswing in civic engagement among young adults nationally is a fact that cannot be swept under the rug.

Battistoni also directs our attention to such thoughtful critics of community service as Harry Boyte, director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota. Boyte argues that the vocabulary and practice of community service stand at odds with the concepts and skills required for effective participation in democratic public life (pp. needed). The “service” paradigm rarely grapples explicitly with issues of power, interest, and accountability, for example. It emphasizes direct person-to-person helping behavior rather than engaging in public work with others to address matters of shared interest. Indeed, to the degree that students seek service opportunities as an escape from a larger political world in which they feel powerless and alien, expanding opportunities for conventional service may actually feed...
civic disengagement-and probably has.

As for the research literature on service-learning, Battistoni believes that while it offers some “tantalizing suggestions,” it is plagued by “substantial weaknesses” that “undermine any convincing claim that widespread service-learning will lead to a reversal of the civic disengagement among youth” (pp. needed). Apart from the usual problems with which social science research must contend-small, often self-selected samples, measurement error, possible contamination of results by uncontrolled factors, and so forth-Battistoni contends (correctly) that research on service-learning and civic engagement is plagued by problems of conceptualization of both the independent and the dependent variables. In terms of the independent variable, “community service” or “service-learning” has included everything from licking envelopes for a few hours at the local United Way to working side-by-side for months with inner-city residents of low-income housing to negotiate improved building conditions and safety. Sometimes the service is integrated into an academic course or program, sometimes not. As for the dependent variable, “many of the studies employ weak or indirect measures of civic or political impacts” (pp. needed). Explicitly political terms and concepts are “eerily absent.”

Despite all this, Battistoni concludes that what the research suggests, and what his own experience confirms, is that community service can be a “potent civic educator”-but only if careful attention is given “to both the substantive issues addressed and the pedagogical strategies to be employed when engaging in service-learning” (pp. needed). The balance of his book offers useful guidance to faculty across disciplinary fields on how to accomplish that.

The first order of business is to flesh out the notion of civic engagement. Rather than impose a single definition-an exercise that may appeal to some but risks extended diversion into unproductive scholastic debate-Battistoni opts for summarizing some of the more common understandings of civic engagement and good citizenship developed by political and social scientists. He then supplements those understandings with themes that emerged from his conversations with faculty and students outside the social sciences.

From the social sciences come five perspectives on citizenship and civic engagement: (1) the constitutional, or liberal, perspective (the citizen as rights-bearing individual); (2) the communitarian (citizenship entails mutual obligations and responsibilities grounded in common ethical values); (3) the participatory democratic (citizens as active participants in the process of governance); (4) “public work” (citizens as producers of public life and not merely consumers of it, clients, or volunteers); and (5) “social capital” (citizens as members of voluntary associations that create mutual bonds of trust and reciprocity) (pp. needed).

Although the boundaries among the five perspectives are not hard and fast, the different points of view do tend to highlight different understandings of what civic education entails and what civic skills are most important to develop. The constitutional perspective, for example, suggests service-learning activities that educate students about electoral processes and encourage them to register and vote. The participatory democratic perspective implies service-learning activities that incorporate a broader range of civic involvement, including participating in public deliberation, serving on local boards, and working with advocacy groups. Civic education from a public work perspective encourages students to conceive of themselves not as community “servants” but as public citizens; it entails coaching students in such skills as public dialogue, negotiation, strategic thinking, and evaluation.

Battistoni’s conversations with students and faculty outside the social sciences reveal additional conceptions of civic engagement, that are worth considering not only because doing so may be instrumental in expanding civic-minded service-learning across disciplinary boundaries, but also because those fresh points of view enrich our collective understandings of civic engagement and community service. The professional schools, for example, are particularly interested in service-learning practices that advance students’ understandings of civic professionalism (expert knowledge is essential to crafting sound public policy) and social responsibility (professionals have ethical obligations to use their skills and knowledge in ways that advance the quality of human and social existence).

Similarly, the concept of social justice can provide a powerful connection to civic engagement for faculty and students at religiously affiliated institutions of higher learning, as well as in certain schools and departments of secular institutions. I would add that a social justice perspective can also attract to the civic-engagement enterprise those students, faculty, and community organizers who find the “service” paradigm at odds with the gut anger at social injustice that animates them.

Battistoni also sees possible linkages between feminist theory and the civic engagement project. “Faculty coming into service-learning from a feminist perspective,” he writes, “may find pathways to
volved in creating solutions to those public issues (pp. needed). "Public problem solving" is another concept that Battistoni includes in his multidisciplinary conception of civic engagement is public leadership. Here again, skeptics may question the wisdom of such a connection. Benjamin Barber, for example, argued that "strong leaders have on the whole made Americans weak citizens" (pp. needed; ref. needed). What matters, of course, is how one defines "leadership." After all, people cannot participate in a public meeting unless someone convenes it. Civic organizations rarely organize spontaneously. Leadership is not synonymous with ordering people around; it can emerge from many places in an organization, group, or community. But emerge it must.

Efforts to reinvigorate the tradition of the public intellectual-scholars speaking, writing, and creating in ways that engage a world beyond academia on matters of general interest-are also relevant to the civic engagement initiative in higher education, says Battistoni (pp. needed). Amen.

Having reviewed various conceptual models that can inform integrating civic education into service-learning, Battistoni proceeds to a discussion of the civic skills to be fostered (pp. needed). The acquisition of basic political information is obviously important, as is developing a capacity to assess that information critically and bring it to bear on specific problems. Development of these cognitive skills should be accompanied by the acquisition of what Battistoni calls "participation skills," the most important of which is a capacity to communicate in public settings-public speaking, persuasive argumentation, and, perhaps especially, the art of listening (pp. needed). "Public problem solving" is the other participative skill that Battistoni emphasizes, meaning the ability to identify public issues underlying problems one observes (such as homelessness, the under-education of youth, or environmental degradation) and the ability to collaborate in creating solutions to those public issues (pp. needed).

A capacity that Battistoni calls "civic imagination" comes into play in this regard, as does "civic judgment" (grounding one's civic action in publicly defendable ethical standards), "coalition building" (working effectively with others-including others who are different and who may not even like one another-to advance specific mutual interests), and "organizational analysis" (exploring and understanding the organizational setting within which one operates) (pp. needed).

What is the students' perspective on all of this? Battistoni's review of the relatively scanty relevant literature on the matter, along with his own experience with students, suggest to him that many students-and particularly ones who attend college in a place other than where they grew up-are interested in service-learning experiences that enable them to gain knowledge and insight into the neighborhoods, city, and metropolitan area in which their college is located. Many students are also eager to learn and understand more about the public problems that create the need for the services they perform (pp. needed).

Another insight is that today's students on the whole do not need to be convinced of the value of knowing how to work productively with others from diverse backgrounds; for most of them, that is a message they have heard-and accepted, at least intellectually-all of their lives. What they say they want are more opportunities to engage in such work: to experience it directly as well as read about it. In a similar vein, students challenge faculty to align campus and classroom practices with the rhetoric of democratic citizenship (pp. needed). Too often, even the service-learning classroom reproduces the dominant pedagogical paradigm that Paulo Freire characterized as the "banking concept of education," in which the teacher "deposits" knowledge into the students' "accounts," for them later to withdraw when needed (pp. needed).

This observation leads to Battistoni's final topic, which are the pedagogical circumstances that best facilitate civic engagement among students. He emphasizes three factors: (1) placement of students in service or "public work" positions that provide experiences conducive to civic learning and skill development; (2) structuring the course in a way that builds in time and space for critical reflection, both individually and collectively; and (3) collaborating with community partners to ensure that their interests as well as those of the students and faculty are reflected in the course plan (pp. needed). The book contains an appendix with sample assignments, exercises, and reflection questions that will be useful to faculty of many disciplines who are interested in incorporating service-learning for civic engagement into their courses.

In sum, Battistoni's book helps us broaden and sharpen our thinking about the meaning of "civic engagement." It offers helpful advice on how stu-
dent involvement in civic work can be integrated into the curriculum across many academic disciplines. And it provides a reasonable argument for why faculty in those disciplines can find it in their interests to do so.

References

Barber, Benjamin needed
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Author

Bio needed