Review Essay
Defining the Catchphrase: Understanding the Civic Engagement of College Students

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Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices
Barbara Jacoby and Associates
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As a leading publisher in higher education, Jossey-Bass explores the current trends, changing dynamics, and critical issues within American colleges and universities. The publisher seeks “to inform and inspire those interested in developing themselves, their organizations and their communities” through a variety of publications and formats (Jossey-Bass, 2010). Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices, by Barbara Jacoby and Associates, does a very good job of both informing and inspiring faculty, staff, and academic leaders to further the civic engagement mission of higher education. By reviewing the titles of other books edited by Jacoby, one can map the emerging trends within the higher education civic engagement movement: Service Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices (1996), Building Partnerships for Service-Learning (2003), and now a book focused on civic engagement. Each of these books has a related yet distinct emphasis.

Jacoby’s latest book captures “examples of good practice” (p. xiii) that focus on “educating students for civic engagement or preparation for active democratic citizenship” (p. 1). The “inherent challenge” (p. 5) to defining civic engagement is a topic referred to throughout the book, from the early pages in the introduction to the concluding chapter. The author notes that “civic engagement” can refer to “both individuals and institutions” (p. 5). This observation is consistent with the following definition of civic engagement provided by Polly Boruff-Jones (2006), a research librarian in higher education, in the Association of College and Research Libraries online newsletter:

Civic engagement is increasingly acknowledged as an important component of higher education...Civic engagement activities may be student-focused and take the form of experiential learning, service-learning, internships, or community service projects; or the focus may be on faculty-community collaboration for scholarly research and partnerships in leadership, economic, or social service development. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive and generally both aspects of civic engagement will be incorporated into an institution’s goals.

According to Boruff-Jones’ distinction, Jacoby’s book is student-focused rather than faculty-focused in its approach to understanding civic engagement in higher education, an emphasis well-framed by Jacoby and many of the contributing authors. With the emphasis on students, a more appropriate title for the book would have been Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices for Student Engagement.

Undoubtedly, fifty years from now, those looking back to trace the growth of the public purposes of higher education in American society will find the contributions of Barbara Jacoby of great value. Her longstanding partnership with Jossey-Bass confirms the publisher’s confidence in her ability to convene contributors on important topics. Through her work with national Campus Compact, as Engaged Scholar for Professional Development, she provides valuable leadership and resources for professionals entering the field as community service directors (Jacoby, in press). Currently, she is senior scholar for the Adele H. Stamp Student Union Center for Campus Life at the University of Maryland, College Park. Through her campus leadership as chair of the Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership, she has generated consensus and vision for civic learning as a distinct aspect of curricular and co-curricular programming. In addition to Campus Compact, national organizations such as NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) are stronger...
due to her active and vibrant participation as a practitioner and scholar.

In this book, Jacoby has drawn together an excellent group to write chapters providing a rationale for and strategies to support the civic engagement of college students. As she articulates in the introduction, the goals of the book are to a) define civic engagement, b) identify civic learning outcomes, and c) provide evidence of good practice (p. 2). Of these three, the book’s strength lies in providing a sampling of good practices occurring inside and outside the classroom. Similar in some ways to Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility by Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens (2003), this book offers examples of good practice in student leadership programs, classroom teaching, and curricular design for first year seminars through capstone courses across higher education institutional types. Some chapters are more likely than others to advance the field, particularly in terms of professional practice, research, and public policy.

In the introduction, Jacoby acknowledges that “civic engagement is a frequent catchphrase in current publications and conversations regarding the public purposes of higher education” (p. 2). According to Wikipedia (2010), “catchphrase” is a term from popular culture “recognized by its repeated utterance.” Given this understanding of the term, it is somewhat disconcerting that the term civic engagement is never clearly defined in this book. Jacoby puts forth a working definition of civic engagement that emerged from the Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership at the University of Maryland; however, it is a cumbersome definition listing a variety of student-focused activities such as learning, valuing, behaving, acting, participating, leading, developing, and promoting social justice locally and globally (p. 9; see also Terp Impact, n.d.). In chapter three, Caryn McTighe Musil provides a more concise summary, stating that the definition of civic engagement put forth in this book is

…active collaboration that builds on the resources, skills, expertise, and knowledge of the campus and community to improve the quality of life in communities in a manner that is consistent with the campus mission. The definition of civic engagement indicates that this work encompasses teaching, research, and service (including patient and client services) not only in but also with the community. Civic engagement includes university work in all sectors of society: nonprofit, government, and business. (Bringle et al., p. 70)

We tend to abbreviate this definition as “Civic engagement can occur through teaching, research, or service that is done in and with the community” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. 39), a definition that includes service-learning classes, community-based research, and faculty professional service. This definition is focused on faculty-community collaboration (Boruff-Jones, 2006) and emphasizes community voice and mutually beneficial partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher).

Over the past two years, it has been interesting to be a participant with the Civic Engagement Rubric Development Team for the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ VALUE project. After completing a set of readings and structured dialogue among our working group, we realized that there were few concise definitions of civic engagement in the literature. Our facilitator kept pressing us for a definition of the term, and while we all could agree upon what a civicly-engaged student “looked like,” it was much more challenging to come to agreement on a definition. Our group concluded that the following definition, based on the work of Thomas Ehrlich (2000), was
most helpful for those who would use the meta-rubric to assess student learning in the domain of civic knowledge and engagement:

Civic engagement is working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi)

In addition, civic engagement encompasses actions wherein individuals participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community (see Civic Engagement Value Rubric, n.d.).

Research underway through the Center for Social Development at Washington University on the International Volunteer Impacts Survey (Lough, McBride, & Sherradan, in press) also uses Ehrlich’s (2000) work when defining civic engagement as “…the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation” to promote “the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (p. vi). Their research confirms that the construct is broad. In evaluating the validity and reliability of the survey, the construct civic engagement is comprised of four independent, yet related, sub-concepts (i.e., civic activism, community engagement, media attentiveness, financial contributions) and includes a range of behaviors from volunteering to voting patterns (Lough et al.).

The degree to which this lack of definitional clarity of the term civic engagement undermines the work or is a natural part of the growth of a field of study (a similar lack of clarity existed with the term “non-profit organization” for nearly 20 years) can be contested (see Powell & Steinberg, 2006). I think it is the latter, and that as with the field of nonprofit and philanthropic studies, there will emerge greater clarity around terms like “civic engagement,” “civic learning,” and “civic responsibility” as we continue to study, research, and define what comprises the construct.

Like her earlier book, Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices, this book is a compilation of various types of chapters: one chapter is a brief historical overview of the public purpose of higher education, six chapters provide case studies of good practice in higher education, four chapters discuss research findings or introduce a conceptual or theoretical framework to understand student civic engagement, and the concluding chapter looks toward the future of higher education civic engagement. Jacoby (2009) describes the book as “organized sequentially” yet each chapter “stands up well individually” (p. 4); citations are included at the end of each chapter and this facilitates using or recommending individual chapters with targeted groups.

I reviewed this book during a strategic planning process within our Center for Service and Learning, and the content generated a number of new ideas for future direction in our work. Community service directors will benefit from the range of topics discussed and the variety of ideas presented. This book also would be helpful as a text for a graduate course in higher education, for it introduces the reader to a historical tracing of the higher education civic engagement movement, the related initiatives of national associations (e.g., Association of American Colleges & Universities, American Association of State Colleges & Universities, Campus Compact), and the variety of institutional types and programs in higher education supporting the development of civic-minded graduates.

For those working with faculty and academic leaders, three of the chapters – Musil, Longo and Shaffer, and Spiezio – are of particular value. Caryn McTighe Musil provides a strong conceptual model for student civic learning. In her chapter, “Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility: The Civic Learning Spiral,” Musil positions civic engagement at the intersection of “three streams of educational reform movements” converging at “this historic juncture” (p. 52). Musil, who serves as senior vice-president of AAC&U with key responsibilities for the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Global Initiatives, provides a clear rationale and evidence for why higher education and business leaders alike value global learning, diversity, and civic engagement. With the rapid changes in American society, civic learning skills are of critical importance for all students, and even more so for graduates who will live their professional lives in a global economy.

The conceptual framework for the civic learning spiral is the result of a Civic Engagement Working Group that emerged through a series of forums in six cities with nonprofit leaders and educators (Leskes & Miller, 2006). The value of this work lies in its delineation of learning outcomes across six elements, or braids, that coexist simultaneously and are interconnected. These six domains – self, communities and culture, knowledge, skills, values, public action – shape learning for both curricular and co-curricular experiences (pp. 62-63). This model was highly influential in the development of the AAC&U Civic Engagement meta-rubric (Civic Engagement Value Rubric, n.d.). After extensive reading and discussion, the AAC&U Civic
Engagement Rubric Development Team concluded that the civic learning spiral was the best conceptual framework upon which to build a meta-rubric for colleges and universities to use or adapt to assess student engagement. In addition to providing an excellent analysis of civic learning outcomes, Musil also discusses implications of the spiral for both civic engagement assessment and research.

Another chapter providing a strong conceptual framework for program development is Nick Longo and Marguerite Shaffer’s discussion of leadership education and public life. Building on Longo’s earlier work exploring the Highlander Folk School leadership model which was foundational to the civil rights movement (2007), the authors describe how this model shaped a curricular leadership program at Miami University through the Harry T. Wilks Leadership Institute. Jointly housed in academic and student affairs, the Institute is a vibrant living-learning community providing a curricular and co-curricular leadership development program grounded in collaborative community problem-solving. The key program goal is for students to learn “knowledge is action-able and that individuals coming together to co-create knowledge empowers them to make positive change in the world around them” (p. 169). This chapter is an excellent example of how a particular conceptual framework, in this case the Highlander leadership model, shapes program design targeted for civic learning outcomes. Because this program yields multiple benefits for students, faculty, and community partners, I would recommend that this model be replicated at other colleges and universities in ways similar to the Bonner Foundation’s Bonner Scholars Program that “supports four-year community service scholarships for students attending twenty-seven colleges and universities” (Keen, 2009, p. 21; see also Keen & Hall, 2008).

Kim Spiezio’s chapter is important for service-learning educators, for both practical and theoretical reasons. Spiezio, a professor of political science and current dean of graduate studies at Cedar Crest College, was the academic director of a multi-campus program that is the focus of chapter five, “Engaging General Education.” He crafts a clear and convincing argument for the value of building democratic classrooms across the curriculum, but especially in service-learning classes. He begins with a compelling statement as to the urgency of this work:

Put simply, the ability to empathize, collaborate, compromise, and integrate suddenly has become as central to the marketplace as it has long been in regard to the town hall. Hence, we stand at the threshold of a perhaps unique his-

torical moment wherein the dictates of capitalism and the requisites of democracy have converged to underscore the necessity of providing students with a civic education. (p. 85)

Spiezio views the classroom as “a distinctive site of civic engagement that can be combined with service-learning and other pedagogies of engagement” (p. 85) to support character education that spans the undergraduate years. The chapter describes the results of an empirical study of the Participating in Democracy Project, funded by the Teagle Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropic, which involved eight colleges and universities, approximately two dozen academic disciplines, and two thousand undergraduates in a range of classroom strategies to support civic engagement (p. 86).

Spiezio does an excellent job of describing the theoretical framework of participatory democracy presented by Carole Pateman (1970), based upon the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. Too often, service-learning educators fall back on the political theory of John Dewey for undergirding the significance of our work (Hatcher, 1997). Other political theories, as well as theories from other disciplinary perspectives (e.g., philosophy, psychology, sociology) can provide new insight into service-learning pedagogy, and this chapter is very beneficial for that reason. The definitions provided for “intrinsic equality,” “empathy and efficacy,” and the “deliberative process” build a strong case for the importance of student voice in designing learning experiences and governing within a democratic classroom (pp. 88-89). For as Spiezio claims, the classroom is not only a learning environment, but “a social and a political system” (p. 90). Unless service-learning educators use democratic teaching techniques, students in service-learning classes may be having a bifurcated experience. Resources developed from the Participating in Democracy Project would be valuable for all instructors, but particularly for service-learning instructors (see Meade & Weaver, 2004). At this chapter’s core is the question, How can we reinforce and replicate the civic lessons learned in the community in our classrooms?

Regrettably, the term service-learning is hidden throughout much of this book, and that is an unfortunate decision by either the editor or publisher. The book reads as if the “find and replace” function on Microsoft Word was used to find and replace the term “service-learning” with the term “civic engagement.” This strategy was most evident in the later chapters where principles of good practice for service-learning and an earlier research agenda for service-learning were simply adapted for civic
engagement (pp. 214, 233), but it also was evident throughout the book.

More importantly, the book fails to articulate in a coherent way the relationship between service-learning and civic engagement. I expected this discussion in the chapter, “Moving from Service-Learning to Civic Engagement,” but instead the focus of the chapter was on the pedagogy of service-learning as a means to achieve social justice. While social justice is a laudable goal and critical framework for many teaching service-learning courses, the terms service-learning and civic engagement are not synonymous. The book does little to acknowledge the crucial role service-learning has played in the civic engagement movement. This is surprising. After all, Barbara Jacoby is one of the leading service-learning educators in the country. Additionally, service-learning plays an integral role in the Carnegie elective classification for Community Engagement. We have argued that service-learning is a “necessary component of effective civic engagement” because when it is well-integrated into the institution it becomes “an enduring aspect of the curriculum that is supported by more than a few faculty, improves other forms of pedagogy, leads to other forms of civic scholarship, and influences faculty roles and rewards” (Bringle, Hatcher, Hamilton, & Young, 2001, p. 93).

Civic engagement is a complex term encompassing a variety of ways to involve college students in meaningful action to improve the quality of life in communities and advance students’ civic learning. The forms of civic engagement will depend, in part, upon such matters as campus mission and climate, administrative support, faculty disciplinary perspectives, student leadership, funding streams, political climate, and community context. Much like the civic learning spiral, each campus must weave together various braids to create a civic engagement spiral for their respective campus to achieve its civic engagement goals. This book will generate ideas and stimulate thinking, and in that regard, Jacoby continues her leadership in informing and inspiring others.

References


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