Participants in, not Spectators to, Democracy: The Discourse on Civic Responsibility in Higher Education

Essay Review

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Civic Responsibility in Higher Education
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“W”hat, after all, is the public under present conditions? What are the reasons for its eclipse? What hinders it from finding and identifying itself? By what means shall its inchoate and amorphous estate be organized into effective political action relevant to present social needs and opportunities?” John Dewey confronted these questions in The Public and its Problems (1927, pp. 125-126) over seven decades ago. Concerned about the “eclipse of the public” in democracy along with the “apathy of the electorate,” he acknowledged the role of scientific advancement with its physical tools of communication in disintegrating the small communities of former times. While accepting modern progress and its inevitable links to democratic forms of government worldwide, Dewey, nonetheless, viewed scientific advancement as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it produced opportunities for people to communicate and associate in different ways; on the other hand, it distanced people from their locale, thereby fracturing the formation of community. No longer did people stay in one place, and therefore, no longer were the traditional forms of living in community possible.

Democracy, for Dewey (1927), required “associated or joint activity” as a condition for the creation of community. But, he wrote, “association itself is physical and organic, while communal life is moral, that is emotionally, intellectually, consciously sustained” (p. 151). It was through interactions among diverse forms of community that democracy could remain vital (Dewey, 1914). Always “in-the-making,” the practice of democracy is a way of life—social, individual, and political. This requires a public that is actively participating, not simply spectating.

Reminiscent of Dewey, Thomas Ehrlich (2000), in his recent edited book, Civic Responsibility and Higher Education, challenges us to confront the decline and disengagement in democracy vis-a-vis political participation in the United States in our present context and times. Under the large, inclusive umbrella of “civic responsibility,” this book is a 400-page collection of 19 essays written by prominent professionals representing a broad cross-section of the higher education community, including representatives of various colleges and universities as well as national organizations. Civic Responsibility and Higher Education contains a critique of the present landscape of higher education, one driven by market forces and pulled in a variety of directions to satisfy its consumers. Its contributors lament that what is lost in the emergent reductionist and utilitarian sensibility of higher education is a discussion of what it means to be “educated” in a democratic society. To counter this trend, Ehrlich and his colleagues challenge us to bring to the center of the discourse on higher education its civic and moral role.

However, at present, higher education is in a double-bind. In an era of decreasing public funding and support, it needs to satisfy the market for its very survival, while simultaneously providing an avenue to critically examine the political and social forces that are shaping its mission. By imploring us not to take democracy for granted, Ehrlich and his colleagues hope to re-couple higher education’s responsibility and accountability with the creation of a reflective public capable of sound judgment. Neither alarmist nor simply critical, this volume also presents constructive practices to re-engage higher education with community. In what follows, I will extract the major themes that are woven in these rich essays and also suggest some ways to further the discourse of civic responsibility in higher education.

The Project of Democracy

Undergirding this book’s proposals for civic responsibility is the revival of colleges and universi-
ties as “agents of democracy.” For many of the essay authors, democracy and education are “ inexorably intertwined” (p. xlii). Being developmental, a democratic society is “one in which citizens interact with each other, learn from each other, grow with each other, and together make their communities more than the sum of their parts” (p. xlii). In their essay on renewing the democratic spirit, Harry Boyte and Nanci Kari present three models of democracy, citizenship, and higher education:

1) The “civics” approach in which citizenship is mainly the act of voting; and the citizen is the individual bearer of rights (with a few other responsibilities such as paying taxes) and a consumer of benefits; 2) the “civil society or communitarian” approach in which the model citizen is the volunteer, citizens are responsible members of a community and citizenship education focuses on teaching character through habits of voluntary involvement; and 3) the “commonwealth” approach in which citizens do public work and are producers of public things. (p. 58)

Their own bias is for the commonwealth approach to democratic renewal—one whose idea of “public work” draws from that of building “the commons” (p. 44). Boyte and Kari argue that the “democratic potential of the politics of public work lies in its capacity to enlist a variety of ideological positions” (p. 57). Interestingly, at least one-third of the essays present proposals that promote the second model—that of a communitarian approach to citizenship. And, while the volume generally expresses dismay at the lack of such minimal political engagement as voting, authors Mathew Hartley, Elizabeth Hollander, David Mathews, Judith Ramaley, Linda Sax and others would not want to limit democratic participation to a “civics” approach that reduces democracy to simply voting; for each of them, social and communal involvement in shaping democracy is crucial. Nevertheless, they are troubled by recent trends that show a decline in political participation. The following analysis of college students’ participation by Sax (pp. 3-18) helps foreground this discussion.

In examining comprehensive freshman student trends, two aspects of civic responsibility emerge: (1) involvement in volunteerism and community service, and (2) interest in politics. In 1998, a record high 74% of college freshmen performed volunteer work during their last year in high school; volunteerism has been on the rise over the past decade. Sax attributes the rise in volunteerism to increases in the number of service programs offered by academic institutions and supported by federal and state governments, in the number of K-12 schools that offer service opportunities, and in the number of high schools with a community service graduation requirement (p. 5).

Despite this increase in volunteerism and community service, Sax finds that students’ interest in politics has declined drastically. This disengagement ranges from a drop in voting (for 18-24 year olds, only 32% voted in 1998 as compared with 50% in 1964) to a lack of interest in keeping up to date with political affairs (58% in 1964 with a drop to 26% in 1998). Sax attributes this to students’ “negative perceptions of politics and politicians and a sense of skepticism” largely due to media coverage of political scandals, government gridlock, etc. There is a general hopelessness about change through political approaches; moreover, “college students feel a sense of disconnection or alienation from the political issues themselves” (p. 7). Paradoxically, then, while there is a growing orientation toward service there is a declining interest in politics. For Sax, involvement in a wide variety of ways that “expose students to a diversity of people and issues is the key to education for citizenship” (p. 16). The more involved the students become, the more likely they are to seek out involvement in their communities after college, argues Sax. However, habits of volunteerism that are fostered in high school and in college are very unstable over time and do not translate into political activity.

Essays in this book do not rule out the “civil society or communitarian” approach to democratic participation. In fact, spread throughout the volume are innumerable examples of ways in which higher education is involved in service-learning programs and volunteer centers that engage the campus with its broader community. For instance, Judith Ramaley connects democratic community life and learning through the three avenues of research, teaching, and service to show how Boyer’s re-conceptualization of “scholarship” can be practiced (p. 229). Lee Benson and Ira Harkavy view democracy as the “soul of America” and, by implication, as the soul of the American school system, including the research university (p. 175). Through school, community, and university partnerships, there can be mutual benefits to advance the cause of democracy. Still others, as Ehrlich discusses, have used community service and volunteering as a means to cultivate character (p. xxvii), with faculty and student awards offered to recognize exemplary work.

Ehrlich’s book also discusses higher education’s role for a deeper understanding and promotion of the “common” or “public” good in democracy; this is the third kind of citizenship—the “commonwealth” approach. No author considers this to be an easy task. Ramaley urges us to look for a broader, more inclusive concept of democracy—one that addresses
our multicultural context. She also argues that universities should enhance their civic responsibility not only by finding the means to link learning and community life through the design of the curriculum but also by serving as centers for community building (p. 230). Addressing the ethos of academia itself is an important point, argues William Sullivan, since the default program of instrumental individualism has led to demoralization and decline in the “industry” of higher education. To regain its institutional identity, higher education must confront “the larger questions of social, political, and moral purpose” in an explicit way (p. 21). Drawing upon Charles Anderson, Sullivan argues that a mode of “inquiry as practical reason” can counter the orientation toward institutional individualism and revitalize the mission of higher education: “its aims as a setting for inquiry; its formative educational function; and the social responsibilities which follow from its civic identity” (p. 31).

Mary Walshok, discussing the role of research universities in this agenda, is concerned that there is a civic disconnect within research universities where faculty and full-time residential students enjoy a certain distance from day-to-day concerns. She also points to the research academy’s civic disconnect due to the challenges of macro-trends such as “technology, demography, and global economy...which used to be the concerns of intellectuals” but are affecting the lives of ordinary citizens. She believes that the knowledge that resides in the academy should be combined with the civic knowledge that resides in the larger community for mutual expansion of understanding and ways to gain practical skills to address democratic issues. For “knowledge without boundaries” is about closing the gap between academic and civic knowledge (p. 301).

The case of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as “champions of unique perspectives in learning and service” is presented by Gloria Dean Randall Scott. Given their distinctive history, black Americans began to have “opportunities for either education or civic engagement” only after the Civil War (p. 263). Using the metaphor of a heart, Scott explains:

The construct of civic development was the right auricle of the heart of HBCUs, joined by the left auricle of teaching and learning, and the left ventricle of creating new knowledge, all of which combined to make up the core of American higher education: teaching, research, and public service. [HBCUs] however, always had, as their right ventricle, a fourth purpose—the pursuit of social justice, which is the core of civic engagement, and the strengthening of democracy. (p. 265)

With high expectations of civic engagement, HBCUs necessarily provided a foundation of information and behavior for closely knit relationships that were “fueled by the high expectations that constituents would learn and practice civility and engage in civic responsibilities while they were students” (p. 266).

This form of deliberate creation of community is also seen in the religious-based (or faith-based) higher education institutions. William Bryon, drawing upon his own experiences, makes a case for faith-based service as a “means for developing concrete opportunities for youth to develop an increased understanding of their membership within a societal framework and their responsibility” (p. 288). Similarly, Paul Elsner highlights the case of transformation at Maricopa Community Colleges with the adoption of service-learning in its mission, and Greg Prince presents the perspective of the liberal arts college in holistic education that involves “inquiry-based, active-learning in which students work to solve real problems with reflection, analysis, and evaluation” (p. 260). Alexander Astin’s essay is the only one that addresses why it is important to educate all students—the underprepared along with the traditional college-bound student—for democracy is about social equity and justice, and the “civic responsibility of higher education is really a matter of values and beliefs” (p. 145). Thus, collectively, for the authors of this volume, civic responsibility is about promoting the project of democracy.

**Making Sense of the Discourse on “Civic Responsibility”**

Jane Wellman argues that unless we use “consistent vocabulary,” it is difficult to account for and assess higher education’s “civic educational and service roles” (p. 323). Given that it is not on the radar screen of the national accountability agenda, she urges clarity in conceptualizing civic education if this work is to be taken seriously:

What does civic education mean, and how should it be measured? What is the community service role, and what activities constitute pieces of it? What are the dimensions of community responsibility for a community college, as distinct from a residential campus, as distinct from a research university? What are specific indicators of the way that this role is carried out? (p. 328)

These are, I believe, significant questions that must be addressed by practitioners and scholars alike. While clarifications of concepts by a variety of authors are interspersed throughout the volume,
there is an absence of agreement on key terms.

For instance, disturbed by the resignation and complacency of the majority who do not exercise their right to vote, Ehrlich boldly sketches out and broadens the scope of “civic responsibility” in the introductory essay with Anne Colby and others. Civic responsibility must include moral responsibility, they argue, as “moral questions undergird what a civically engaged citizen confronts” (p. xxi). Against moral skepticism and relativism that undermine democracy, they favor reasoned moral discourse in which “citizens are encouraged to express, revise, and refine their own ethical commitments” (p. xxiv). Higher education is obligated to help students to “wrestle with their own moral dilemmas as well as with larger social and political concerns” (p. xxiv). They do not propose moral inculcation. Rather, the moral and civic learning that they urge is “totally integrated with substantive knowledge and intellectual reasoning, and works to allow students to develop their own frameworks of judgment” (p. xxiv). An active citizenry should also exhibit moral responsibility.

To its credit, Ehrlich’s book takes on the controversial issue of requiring civic engagement that has moral content in order for people to work together to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and to develop the “combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference” (p. x). The introductory essay sets the stage for the volume by stating clearly that dealing with civic issues necessarily requires a “moral compass and good judgment.” Democratic principles are “grounded in moral principles.” These principles include, but are not limited to: broadening tolerance and respect for others, addressing procedural impartiality and fairness of resource allocation, and being concerned about both the rights of the individual and the welfare of the group (pp. xxv-xxvi).

If civic responsibility were simply about creating a politically and civically active citizenry, then the problem of “community” would not arise. Dewey grappled with the latter as a fundamental project of democracy, in much of his writing. Many of the essays in this book call for the development of moral obligation or even character formation through involvement in the community; thus, congruent with the discourse on “civic responsibility” is innumerable proposals for practicing civic engagement. The introductory essay explains “civic engagement” as “working together to make a difference in the civic life of our communities... It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes” (p. x). Lest we worry about indoctrination, Ehrlich wants “reasoned” commitment to democracy. A la Socrates, Ehrlich believes that the unexamined life is unworthy, and that the examined life requires intellectual as well as moral and civic virtues.

Ramaley explains that the classical definition of “civic virtue” is a predisposition to act in accordance with knowledge of the public good and the sustained desire to achieve it (p. 228). Drawing upon the concepts of politics to interpret civic responsibility, David Mathews, in his conceptual essay on how politics control the concepts of civic responsibility, observes:

What if we thought of “civic responsibility” as responsibility for the civic realm, responsibility not just to other people but for what we and others share—for the goods we have in common, for the quality of our life together, for the creation of a just social order? While that would not invalidate individualistic views of civic responsibility, such a frame of reference might expand our understanding of higher education’s obligations and opportunities. (p. 150)

Public life requires that we join in action to achieve the highest goods, argues Mathews, and it is political in that it includes all that has to be done in the body politic (p. 151). Societies become democratic and civil when there are opportunities for people to learn the importance of listening to all views, even those they dislike, of “working through” conflicting approaches to solving a problem, and of building common ground for action.

Exploring the connections between the core educational missions of higher education and “civic vitality,” Carol Schneider supports “an engaged academy,” arguing that the “higher education community’s sense of how it addresses this espoused purpose is in need of fundamental reconceptualization” (p. 100). Higher education’s discontent can be traced to how it conducts its business of organizing knowledge for teaching and learning. The over-emphasis on analytical skills needs to be questioned. For Schneider, civic responsibility is cultivated instead through actively probing the “central issues that confront us all as citizens in a self-determining democracy” (p. 108). Furthermore, as Sullivan explains, what we need is a democratic yet reflective public in which “to become more self-aware is the first step toward awakening to one’s responsibility” (p. 34).

**Down-to-Earth Practices of Civic Engagement and Responsibility**

It is a testimony to their commitment and knowledge that Ehrlich and his colleagues, in their expansive references and experiences, cover the broad landscape of engagement in higher education. In
doing so, they follow in the footsteps of many contemporary writers who decry democracy's decline but also simultaneously address curricular, pedagogical, and institutional reform (Barber, 1999; Briad, 1999; Nussbaum, 1997; Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999). Among the down-to-earth suggestions, drawn either from the personal experiences of the authors or based on their visits to a variety of campuses, are recommendations for practices of engagement that appear to help alleviate the problems raised in this volume. These fall under the following broad categories, developed by Colby and Ehrlich with their co-authors in the introduction: (1) institutional intentionality that is clear to all within higher education and out in the community; (2) conscious connections and links among a wide range of programs—both curricular and co-curricular—to enhance their holistic impact; (3) clarity and discussion of the conceptual framework that supports these programs; (4) active pedagogies; (5) formation of a network of scholars to undertake and share assessment and research; and (6) inter-institutional sharing of this work (pp. xl-xli). Given the constraints of space, I will highlight a few of the dozens of practices that are woven throughout the volume.

One of the primary hurdles to civic engagement has to do with disciplinary fiefdoms. Edward Zlotkowski draws upon his seminal work related to service-learning and the academic disciplines.

According to Zlotkowski:

We need to recognize the disciplines as strategic leverage points...Unless we are able to cross reference our efforts—working vertically through institutional groupings and horizontally through disciplinary affiliations—our efforts will lack the kind of multidimensionality we will need to impact a century-long trajectory of civic disengagement and the almost fabled inertia of academic culture. (p. 321)

The practice of service-learning in promoting civic responsibility is discussed throughout the volume. This pedagogy is of particular interest to the authors as large numbers of institutions have created specialized centers that help broker and build partnerships for the smooth operation of service-learning and volunteer projects.

In redefining faculty scholarship as engagement, Hollander and Hartley, Ramaley, Schneider, and Nancy Thomas in particular, refer to successful changes made by institutions that reward faculty who integrate their “outreach” work with their teaching and service in ways that benefit the community. For instance, Ramaley writes that engagement is:

...characterized by shared goals, a shared agent-

da, agreed upon definitions of success that are meaningful both to the university and to the community participants, and some pooling or leveraging of university and public and private funds provided by other participants. The resulting collaboration or partnership is mutually beneficial and is likely to build capacity and competence of all parties. (p. 236)

Essays in Civic Responsibility in Higher Educaton also discuss at length the conditions that must be created in higher education to support meaningful engagement. These include systemic and transformative changes where there is clarity of purpose, reinforcement of an institutional climate conducive to change, and consistency of message conveyed by the leaders to the faculty and to the community.

For example, education for civic responsibility requires inquiry-based, active learning in which students work to solve and also reflect on real-world problems. The liberal arts have traditionally brought human and civic arts to bear upon the problems and concerns of the human condition (p. 30). The service-learning movement on campuses has revitalized the academy by bringing the problems of the community to bear on the teaching and learning process. As Schneider explains, the work of civic responsibility is promoted when boundaries of disciplines and disciplinary cultures get blurred, and integrative and relational learning involves students in the difficult work of democracy within the community (pp. 100-102). She goes on to say:

Education for a diverse democracy should not be viewed as a topic for one or two discrete—therefore marginalized—courses intended to replace the old Western Civilization sequence. Rather, it should be addressed recursively, across the curriculum, through a combination of courses taken in general education, topical issues explored in the context of one’s major, and experiential learning expressly designed to develop dialogic capacities and collaborative problem-solving. (p. 121)

Along similar lines, Thomas provides examples of activities that have the potential to engage higher education in its civic mission (p. 65). She believes that the “engaged campus” involves multiple constituencies and programs that include student initiatives, institutional initiatives, clinical/field-based activities, centralized academic units with outreach missions, and faculty professional service and outreach. However, she also acknowledges the many barriers to enhancing civic life and engagement, one of which is the governance of the institution, which often times is far from being democratic itself (p. 94).

Penelope Eckert and Peter Henschel support community involvement through digital means. They do
not believe that technology necessarily distances students from their communities; rather, technology has the potential for “new values, skills, and knowledge that supplant some of the old, and that are eventually integrated into traditional ways of doing things” (p. 196). Being on-line, they argue, “helps students create new communities and networks that enhance the possibilities for local participation and civic life” (p. 199). For Jay Rosen, higher education plays a significant role in re-linking public journalism to those traditions that “stress public service and vital connection to community” (p. 172). He finds much for which to hope when his field of journalism is called upon to perform its civic duty. In her “afterword,” Zelda Gamson presses higher education to be self-critical in examining its mission of detached knowledge production (p. 372).

While raising these recommendations, numerous essays address the degree to which these recommendations are being implemented by a large number of campuses. Given the hopes and aspirations reflected in this collection of essays, this volume should be of interest to critics concerned about the decline of democracy and the loss of civic examination and direction in higher education. In addition, practitioners and policy-makers looking for ways to address this loss will be pleased with the practical approaches for enhancing education for civic responsibility. I offer the following points as a means to further the discourse on civic responsibility.

**Pluralism’s Challenge and Critical Self-Examination.** One of the most ancient philosophical problems—pluralism—poses particular challenges for democracy. The tensions between the one (*unum*) and the many (*pluribus*), between unity and diversity, and between consent and dissent are serious challenges to democratic life. While Ehrlich and his colleagues are right that there must be “reasoned” understanding and practice of civic responsibility, these tensions of community exist both within and without the walls of academia. Living in a pluralistic and conflict-centered democracy, we confront the incomensurability of goods, including those of “liberty” and “equality.” Moreover, pluralism’s strength lies in its multiplicity of voices. But, given its culture of entrenched power structures, does higher education welcome or permit voices that challenge the status quo? We need to ask, who sets the discourse, even in the field of civic responsibility? Instead of the “white” voice dominating and defining the civic responsibility agenda, what might be done so that historically-marginalized groups could join and feel safe in dialogue and in setting and framing the issues? What sensibilities would the hitherto-silenced voices offer? The academy must engage in critical self-reflection and deep understanding of voice, marginalization, exclusion, dominance, silencing, and power relations in order to create an authentic institutional ethos that cares about and embodies democratic principles.

**Re-Conceptualization of “Community.”** In contemporary times, the notion of “community” is quickly being redefined. We need not look any further than the “dot-com” community and the “gated” community to support this point. The July-August 2000 issue of The Harvard Magazine carries an article entitled, *The Gated Menace of “Private Cities.”* Private cities are demarcated by property owners rather than by government, with residents forming “gated communities” that wall themselves off to form a starkly segregated isolationist society (Gudrais, pp. 20-21). According to Gerald Frug (2000), the chief danger of such homogenous communities is that it engenders fear of “the other.” The fewer the encounters with those who are different, the larger the pool of “the other” grows. Thus, for the wealthy, with the creation of entire communities as private cities, there becomes less of a need to interact with those who are different—a harsh challenge for the survival of pluralistic democracy and for the agenda of civic responsibility. Add to this problem the 400,000 “communities” that reside on the Web (Le Beau, 2000, p. 38) and the proliferation of “dot-coms,” and the once valued “neighborhoods as communities” notion will surely continue to elude.

Furthermore, children today are growing up more with a sense of *space* than of *place*. The environmental movement has begun to address this with practices of place-based education (Smith & Williams, 1999). How might the agenda of civic responsibility interface with the environmental agenda for developing a sense of place? Finally, in an age of technology, what pedagogical practices would address the development of conscience and the notion of membership crucial to the formation of community (Green, 2000)?

**Meta-Analysis of Concepts.** While this book undertakes some of this, through a meta-analysis to clarify concepts would be useful, as Wellman argues in her essay. Terms such as “civic responsibility,” “civic engagement,” “civic learning,” “social responsibility,” “civil society,” “civil learning,” etc. are used interchangeably and indiscriminately by the authors as well as by the promoters of new pedagogies informed, for instance, by volunteerism and service-learning. To further gain legitimacy, the work must be founded on strong theoretical frameworks and must engage faculty, administrators, students, and the community not only in debating, defining, and framing higher education’s civic role, but also in how it gets manifested in practice.
Coupling of Rights with Responsibilities. The authors are to be commended for addressing the decline of civic responsibility in our society today. It is to its credit that this book is calling on higher education to be at the forefront of serving in a responsible capacity to advance democracy. However, it has been remiss in not discussing the obstacles we face when we try to enhance the notion of “responsibility” in a culture that is so focused on individuals’ “rights.” As Benjamin Barber has argued, citizens are “educated, not born” in the arts of liberty (1998, p. 162). For him, since democracy has no blueprint, it is through discourse that we discover it. While there are challenges for higher education to involve individuals in developing a sense of the public domain, the academy is well-positioned to engage the public in what it would mean to re-couple rights with responsibilities. Debating the issues with persons who are strong proponents of individual rights would stimulate the discourse on civic responsibility.

In its expansiveness, Ehrlich’s Civic Responsibility in Higher Education is inviting, invigorating, and hopeful. As the borders of our higher educational institutions stretch and become permeable, self-reflection, inquiry, and critical thinking should become a habit in the formation, engagement, and reconnection of the various “publics.” For civic responsibility in higher education is the enterprise of developing participants in, not spectators to, democracy.

Notes

1 See his 18-volume series on “Service-Learning in the Disciplines,” published by the American Association of Higher Education (may be found at www.aahe.org).

References


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