By history, mission, and concept, American universities are uniquely woven into the fabric of American democracy. There is no comparable socializing agent with the same ability to train the students in their care to become civic agents, give heart and mind to their local communities, shape institutions, debate and develop policies, and critically reflect on the future direction of our country and our world. Democracy was not the central value in our Colonial colleges because at the time of their establishment, we were uncertain of our status, perhaps even about our aspirations as self-governing people. Colonial colleges did not operate with a view of the whole nation, but instead with the mindset of denominations. It was only with the emergence of our society as one hopeful for a continental and a political unity—a conviction nearly lost in the Civil War—that we began to see higher education as something that could help us to accomplish a unique vision for ourselves as a nation. While we can point to the Morrill Act that was passed at the end of the Civil War as repurposing colleges and universities as a means to build a nation out of a continent (literally from the ground up), the divisions that persisted through the remainder of the 19th and early 20th century still obscured and constrained the role of higher education in contributing to the success of the American democratic experiment.

According to higher education historian George Marsden, World War I inspired a kind of “patriotic hysteria” that shot through the country (1996, p. 309). Universities and the nation as a whole began to think about the ways they could each use their resources to support an American free and democratic society. Marsden described this period’s urge to serve the country this way: “If the highest morality...was to serve democratic society, then no calling was higher for professors as well as universities to put themselves at the nation’s service” (p. 309). There was an additional surge in our national commitment to higher education after World War II. President Truman charged the newly formed Commission of Higher Education with the “task of examining the functions of higher education in our democracy and the means by which they can best be performed” (Quoted in Thelin, 2004, p. 268). The Truman Report and the GI Bill asserted (for it could not yet be demonstrated) that the nation’s universities, in cooperation with the federal government, should be aligned to most effectively further American democracy. This mandate, however imperfectly it came to be realized for several decades, provided the basis for an unprecedented investment in public higher education and support for many private institutions as well. In fact, it led to the promulgation of a new creed recited with reverence by policy makers and educators. We put our faith in higher education as a democratic machine turning out scientific discoveries and eager, thoughtful citizens with at least passable efficiency.

In recent decades, many observers from vantage points inside and outside the academy have noted that universities have been moving farther and farther from incorporating the development and study of democratic citizenship into their coursework and activities (Marsden, 1996; Reuben, 1996) and have given less to building a common democratic experience than to offering economic and private benefits to individuals who happen to work and live in a democratic context (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). In fact this concern has been the primary focus of our work at the University of Michigan organized within the context of the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good. Since 2000, the National Forum has organized a series of studies, dialogues, and public engagement activities investi-
gating the role of higher education in a changing society with the goal of furthering a professional movement and enhanced public understanding of what is at stake if we lose colleges and universities as significant agents of social, civic, and democratic cohesion and renewal. Our perspective, based on over a decade of scholarship and engagement, is that many of the values we associate with higher education, including expanded access, academic freedom, and preparation for active participation in the whole democratic experience, will depend on our ability to lead our students, faculties, and the general public toward an active appreciation of what we are intending to do, how it is best done, and how it serves the public good (National Forum, 2003).

But even as that case is made, the trend toward narrowing (and by that we mean diminishing) higher education’s significance in supporting democracy has continued. The recent downturn in the economy adds additional pressure on universities to invest not in their surrounding communities or in their students’ personal and civic development, but in preparing students for the competitive job market. In their book, “To Serve a Larger Purpose”: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education, editors John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley suggest that, even in this challenging environment, there remain signs of higher education’s commitments to democracy. The authors report that many centers of “civic engagement” and “service learning,” continue to crop up on campuses across the country despite pressure to focus only on leading students to the job market. The students, staff, and faculty that work and serve in these centers are interested in becoming involved in their surrounding communities. Sometimes that involvement comes in the form of a course on community development that may include a volunteer project at a Habitat for Humanity site, sometimes it comes through sending students to a local school to tutor neighborhood youth, and sometimes it comes in through one of countless other examples of community service and learning. The many inductions of these types of programs on college campuses are connected broadly through a mutual belief in civic engagement as an important part of learning and a conviction that universities should be thoughtful institutional citizens in the communities in which they reside.

Saltmarsh and Hartley are more than merely supportive of the emergence of these centers on the nation’s campuses. They seek through their book to elevate these centers’ purposes by situating them in the context of a larger “civic engagement movement” (p. 14), which they suggest is still at its early stages and continues to struggle to develop the set of coherent goals needed for it to grow in power and influence. Their claim that a movement is forming is not new. We argued this point in a 2005 book (see Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt) in which some of the same authors who contributed to this text suggested that the movement was nascent, dispersed, immature—but absolutely real. Both our 2005 book and this current one acknowledge that the beliefs and conceptual frameworks that support the movement go back nearly a century, defined by John Dewey, Jane Addams, and others. But the test that might be associated with the emergence of a movement, as we have acknowledged, is difficult. In the introduction to their book on a similar theme, Pasque, Bowman, and Martinez (2009) advise that, “the concept of a “movement” is very complicated in social science and somewhat mysterious in terms of the ways it is viewed by the general public. It is certainly not an idea that can be casually asserted” (p. xv). They then go on to offer some benchmarks, drawn from a speech by Elizabeth Hollander, for setting the point at which a set of activities becomes something more: networks of informal interaction, shared beliefs, a sense of participation, an oppositional idea, and spheres of activity that are distinct from the institutions toward which the movement is directed.

Accordingly, the contribution of this book is not that, rightfully or otherwise, it clusters a set of activities into a movement. If that characterization is an overstatement, it has already been made. This book is arguably important because Saltmarsh and Hartley are in a favorable position to objectively assess the movement they describe, drawing on the depth of their previous scholarship and the critical tools they have demonstrated. Both bring highly regarded qualities to their work and these are evident in their book’s organization and the way in which ideas unfold, rendered in the voices of an impressive array of contributors.

The editors, in their introduction and opening chapters, argue that this movement faces two central challenges. First, the movement is de-centralized. It is well documented that many of the various offices and programs that support this work for students are separated from each other both within and across campuses. Unless there is a more successful strategy to attract the founding and emerging leaders of these promising initiatives to actively coalesce, share, and define a field, “the right hand of the movement [will continue to] not know what the left hand is doing” (p. 290).

The second, and perhaps more controversial, challenge to the civic engagement movement described by Saltmarsh and Hartley is that it must be willing to be far more bold in both its politics and actions. The authors observe that what has developed on campuses is a “rather conventional, even timid, civic engagement—one that rests easily within the status quo and
rarely challenges it. Rather than openly questioning the prevailing norms, customs, and structures of the academy, civic engagement efforts have instead adapted in order to ensure their acceptance and legitimacy within it” (p. 290). This challenge may come as a particularly difficult one for many universities to accept and address. The implications of reversing the trend could cause a vulnerable and under-established innovation to be exposed to political scrutiny when it hasn’t the power base to fend off attack. Quite possibly, it could mean that the university would need to shift its stance from working to quell student and faculty dissent, to openly inviting and encouraging it. As the authors observe, even if institutions themselves don’t change to be more politically active, they will feel the pressure of interested students and faculty who are willing to take risks as activists and scholars as they witness injustices and affronts to democracy, circulating in and outside of the campus walls. Without the support of the institution, faculty and students who choose to challenge prevailing campus norms risk facing negative repercussions of their activism.

Another theme throughout this book is the complicated relationship between students and the communities in which they engage. Many scholars have written about the ways in which service-learning impacts students and the culture of an institution (Furco & Billig, 2001; Lovat, Dally, Clement, & Toomey, 2011). A discussion which includes the detractors of service-learning is growing as well. If not properly prepared, sometimes students enter a community hoping to do good without a complete understanding of how different communities function. Saltmarsh and Hartley offer an alternative model for engaging in communities with democracy in mind. This shifts university-community partnerships from a one-way exchange where the university thinks of itself as offering its expertise and service to the community to a more equal exchange. For Saltmarsh and Hartley, “Democratic engagement seeks the public good with the public, and not merely for the public, as a means of facilitating a more active and engaged democracy” (p. 20).

The various chapters in this volume represent the viewpoints of many recognized contributors to the growth of this field as well as some new voices. Guided by the careful, but provocative framing offered by the editors, the book holds form while providing an abundant “democratic flowering of civic engagement” through which the two challenges that Saltmarsh and Hartley outlined are actively addressed (p. 11). Programs on specific campuses are described in chapter 3; the historical, political, and intuitional aspects of democratic engagement on campuses are discussed in chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, and 11; the contributions of faculty, students and staff in this civic movement are addressed in chapters 6, 8, and 9; and challenges and successes in service-learning course work and research are discussed in chapters 7 and 10. Though student participation in the development and future of the civic engagement movement is discussed specifically in chapter 9, and is a theme throughout the text, and while the contributing authors represent a diverse group of faculty and university administrators, the absence of student activists as chapter authors is regrettable. Students play a significant role as learners and participants in the democratic engagement activities of a campus, and it would have been valuable to have their voice represented.

Chapter 8, “Faculty Civic Engagement: New Training, Assumptions, and Markets Needed for the Engaged American Scholar,” is particularly noteworthy. Here KerryAnn O’Meara addresses the challenges surrounding faculty participation and support of civic engagement programs. O’Meara agrees with Saltmarsh and Hartley that the term “engagement” has taken on many meanings throughout the university, which she uses her chapter to tease apart. The “scholarship of engagement,” as she calls it, has its own rich interdisciplinary history (p. 178), and many of the programs which now fall under the auspices of service-learning programs or civic engagement initiatives were occurring on college campuses long before those terms existed (p. 181). Yet, despite its long history, there remain many challenges to engaged scholarship that are structural to the academy itself. Faculty and doctoral students’ tendency to work alone in an environment of “competitive individualism” does not often leave room for outside engagement (p. 185). If civic engagement programs are going to gain significant traction within the university, these individualistic tendencies must be challenged. Breaking down the barriers between faculty, students, and communities would not only help the academy more align with the spirit of American democracy, but challenge the one-sided model of learning, where knowledge is given by one group and received by another.

Richard Battistoni and Nicholas Longo’s chapter discusses another important group to consider when addressing engagement on a college campus: the students. Chapter 9, “Putting Students at the Center of Civic Engagement,” acknowledges that much of the scholarship surrounding campus engagement work is directed toward faculty development (p. 201). Students are treated as recipients of the knowledge generated, not as participants in its development (p. 201). If we are to move beyond the “rather conventional, even timid, civic engagement” that Saltmarsh and Hartley describe, students must participate in its development.
This book arrives just as students once again are demonstrating on campuses over the injustices they perceive in the society and in the world around them. And once again, college administrators seem torn between preserving the campus order and promoting the myth that they preside over apolitical learning environments. Even while recognizing (at orientation and commencement speeches at least) that student engagement in the world will provoke questions and claims, many of them difficult, unpleasant or angry, institutional stewards seem to remain fearful that their students’ encounters with reality would take them beyond their televisions. While we need to be training our undergraduate and graduate students to work as thoughtful citizens in communities and use what is learned in the classroom in service of the broader world, the greater challenge might not be placed on our students. The leaders of our institutions of higher education need to remember just how intertwined the work of colleges and universities must be with our own democracy—a connection that has been developing, unevenly but inexorably, over our history as a nation.

Overall, this book offers an extensive review of strategies and examples of the kind of democratic engagement the authors describe. The diverse backgrounds and visions of the body of articles presented add richness to the discussion surrounding the future of civic engagement and service-learning on college campuses. It serves to remind college policy makers, scholars, and practitioners alike that American democracy is intertwined—not by unfortunate circumstance but by conviction and purpose. In the end, however, the claims for a movement made in this book, in those we have written, and in those written by others, still evoke the image of the watchmaker. With a trained eye it is easy enough to see that there is a movement occurring, worthy of description and quite satisfying in its own right. But is that enough to claim that the time for meaningful change has finally come?

References


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