For over a century and a half, scholars and practitioners in higher education certainly have spent far more ink extolling the legacy of the Morrill Act than it took to record the original legislation. Recently, to explore the foundational ideas of Dewey, we have been prompted to move on from his writings and examine his dream (Benson, Harckavy, & Puckett, 2007). In general it has become quite fashionable to tie a discussion about the social responsibilities of colleges and universities to earlier times in the history of higher education. This seems to be especially true when exploring ideas about civic engagement or the democratic role of education.

Perhaps we have a sense that things were better once, or at least were inspired by much bigger dreams of the role that higher education once had in shaping society. Perhaps there is something of romance in the history of engaged scholarship or in previous moments captured in the relationship between communities and institutions. Or perhaps we have decided that we have reached a time when we must go back before we can go forward.

It is not only the state of institutions and their increasingly self-absorbed priorities that may have some believing that we once dwelt in better times. The current state of society requires that we look to the unrealized dreams of the past, especially when reflecting upon the influence and service provided by leading social institutions through their development and ascendency in American life. Judged collectively, it may be argued that our institutions—especially our educational institutions—may have forgotten something of how to nurture democracy. Through analysis of three different generations of civic innovation, Nicholas V. Longo takes an important step in informing this discussion.

Longo, in his book, “Why Community Matters: Connecting Education with Civic Life,” offers a distinctive approach to building a historical context for engaged service and scholarship. He closely examines several ideas from our national experience that, while known to many in higher education, seem at first to exist outside our direct lineage. While filling in the connections between three ground-breaking social innovations and higher education, he recaptures an important aspect of the legacy of these efforts. Even more importantly, he provides us with new sources of inspiration, and changes our basic perspective on the centrality of “community” in community service.

The author is a professor in the educational leadership program at the University of Miami at Ohio, and this distinct focus on leaders and leadership comes through vividly in the way he approaches his book. His theme is carried in stories about leaders: Dewey, Addams, and Horton are premiered. Longo’s lessons for the present are illustrated in the heroics of these well known figures. The leadership he presents, while differing in its unique expression from context to context, is remarkably consistent in its fundamental concern for mutuality, respect, and generativity. He promotes a leadership style that is visionary and groundbreaking, but it is also much more; it is derived from needs of the “followers.” While the title of his book suggests that “community matters,” it may have been equally argued, using his facts, that “leadership matters” without diminishing his emphasis.

In fact, this book could be read as a reminder that there once were giants that found the ability to challenge class barriers, social and professional roles, expectations of gender, and even their own sense of preparedness to tackle monumental issues. Longo reexamines the establishment of Hull House in Chicago by Jane Addams, the story of the Highlander Folk School under the leadership of Myles Horton, and the stories of many others, including his most contemporary example, the Neighborhood Learning Community in Chicago.
Minneapolis, all with reverence. His message does not seem to be that such things are beyond the rest of us, but that the rest of us would have to begin with the same courage and determination shown by the individuals described here if we are to overcome similar odds to succeed in our own spheres. The barriers he describes from the lives of these innovations and the leaders that took them are not entirely different than the ones faced now: concern for professional validation, the stubborn and persistent reminders that what is being tried runs counter to prevailing wisdom, financial and organizational dilemmas. It required the leaders in these stories to step outside of convention to take the actions that they determined were needed in service to their sense of communities. They were no better indemnified against failure than we would be now—and perhaps less so.

Simply put, this book argues for connections. At a conceptual level, the book is successful in its effort to connect education, community, and democracy as powerfully interrelated ideas. To do so, Longo makes other important connections, including bridges that span a hundred years of social history, bridges between contexts constructed in 19th century Chicago and 20th century Monteagle, Tennessee, and bridges between the work of universities and these well known, community-based initiatives. Some of these bridges have been discovered by Longo in his research. Others were made through his insightful portrayal of relationships that, until now, might not have been fully appreciated. It is appropriate therefore that the author uses a framework capable of restoring the life and logic to related but seemingly distant matter: an ‘ecology of civic learning,’ which defines the overlapping points between education and community that contribute to democracy.

Ecological awareness pushes things from the center of our models of how the world works and argues for concentricity. Thus, Longo disputes the role of the schools as the nexus for education, and asserts that communities (more broadly defined in the book as a web of institutions) should serve as the center for educational process in the life of citizens. And those outcomes should be more aimed at civic learning and community that contribute to democracy.

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By focusing on the mutual education of college students and residents of Hull House, he argues that civic goals were reached because college students engaged with community in meaningful ways and community residents had a stable resource to connect them. The relationship of Addams and Dewey serves to reconstruct Addams as an educational theorist contributing the ideal democratic aims up to which education should live. Through this action and theorizing, education moves out of a school-centered model to a community-centered model. This expands both where education occurs and what counts as education. The central tenet of this education is that it never leaves the community.

He also frames the Highlander Folk School through the ecology of civic learning, arguing that Myles Horton, the school’s founder, could envision the success of uncredentialized adult learning, “especially when learning took place within the context of a larger purpose” (p. 71). With the school’s fluid organizational style aimed at a broader understanding of education, the aims of the institution have shifted multiple times always to best serve the demands of learners and constituents. Its significance in the civil rights movement could not be overstated. Its focus on literacy education aimed at voter participation and the training of Rosa Parks marks some of these monumental efforts.

The final case, the Neighborhood Learning Community (NLC), is the most recent and youth-aimed. It focuses on the creation of “a culture of
learning” that crosses racial and ethnic boundaries through a network of community organizations. The network consists of people from a number of ethnicities, and particularly focuses on ‘common work of public significance’ (p. 96). And although this program focuses mainly on the development of and challenges with developing youth programs in St. Paul, it reaches far and often far beyond the classroom. Through summer camps, youth dialogues, and a community Teachers Institute, youth civic education is fostered through many channels.

Longo connects these three institutions by focusing on the influence they had on one another. The relationship between Jane Addams and Dewey is emphasized to develop the democratic ideals of education. Later these ideas are extended to Horton, as he asks Jane Addams about the political challenges she faced early in Hull House. When talking about the Neighborhood Learning Community, Longo emphasizes the Jane Addams School for Democracy. Civic learning is an important concept in society at this time, but the emphasis on these few interrelated cases portrays this work more like a social clique sustained by few rather than an essential movement for a healthy, educated society.

These stories are essential to tell, and, in the case of Hull House and the Highlander Folk School, have been told multiple times. But Longo moves these stories to action in a section directed to community practitioners. He emphasizes the importance of understanding a community to do civic engagement work successfully within that community. This is something that each of these cases brings. Addams moved in, Horton brought in community members to share local problems, and NLC brought together a network of community members to define their own problems. Longo highlights the unknown as a major obstacle in doing engagement work in schools. Teachers may not know a place well, and, thus, may not know what is best for that place. Another important point is an emphasis on connecting diverse communities. All of the cases share this effort. Additionally, however, the earlier cases adopt ideas from other countries, while the contemporary case brings multiethnic people together to create new ways to empower locally.

For a book that does such a masterful job of making connections between concepts, history, and contexts, it is entirely appropriate that the most important connection Longo makes is between our identities as inheritors of the work of Dewey, Addams, and Horton and the leaders whose contributions give life to his thesis. We began this essay by citing the leadership and the courage it took to move beyond convention to achieve the kind of innovative community service illustrated in the examples that form the spine of this book. There is a form of risk-taking that may be the most difficult of all for educators, the threat of proceeding beyond one’s confidence in what is known. It may be the most constraining of harnesses—the web of what we know.

Longo cites the wonderful moment when Jane Addams is presented with the message that a young woman is giving birth in the neighborhood, unattended because she is unmarried and without resources to purchase assistance. Addams hurries to the house and helps deliver the child. Walking back to her office, even she is amazed that she did such a thing for she knew nothing certain of the process prior to the moment she was called to serve. By this point in her life, fortunately, Addams had inspired enough conviction in her associates that they could embolden her in her doubts. The message of this book is captured in what happens next: Her companion exhorts her (and us) not to “hew down to the point of our ignorance.” Hiding behind what we don’t know is certainly the safest form of failure we might find.

And indeed, we can learn from these connections. Longo adds dimensionality to current thinking about higher education, although this may not be his aim. He explores a higher education in the form of higher learning—this learning is not institutionally bound, but holds higher education institutions at the center of civic aims. This is an essential contribution. Pasque (in press) outlines the specific role of a deep understanding required for higher education to make social change: “We, higher education leaders and policy makers, need to know more about the intricacies of the multiple relationships between higher education and society and how the accompanying assumptions and implications of perspectives, policies, and procedures affect farther than any one person may see directly” (p. 37). These words necessitate the reciprocal relationship that Longo defines as essential in successful leadership.

Longo writes with a similar message, but removes the centrality of educational institutions. In his conception, the starting place of these relationships is less important than a mutual aim at civic engagement and democracy. He argues that “we must rely on the myriad of places where people learn and act collectively; we must emphasize bridging the connections between these formal and informal educational opportunities; and we must promote the public dimensions of education by teaching democratic skills, values, knowledge, and practices” (p. 9). Although he doesn’t sever the concept of education from the institutions—schools, universities, and colleges—that have been central to its understanding for
so long, he holds them second to the aim of creating a more democratic society.

He makes a contribution through integrating historical narratives about leadership centered on the place where education and community intersect. The result of this interwoven narrative is a core aim of many higher education institutions: civic engagement in multiple forms. A strong contribution to higher education revealed from Longo’s look back into history is the potential to still learn “higher,” but that not necessarily being inside the walls of higher education institutions. This work encourages higher education institutions to broaden contributions from the binds of a physical institution. It requires institutions to lead more, but more so, to listen more to community needs.

Through his analysis of the relationship between the local community and the leaders in community engagement, Longo carves out a large space for civic engagement in higher education. The analysis of community and leadership frequently incorporates higher education institutions as part of communities. Much of this successful civic engagement was not done by higher education institutions looking to achieve a civic engagement mission; instead, it was accomplished by higher education institutions educating students and working locally. Harkavy (2006) captures this eloquently: “When colleges and universities give very high priority to actively solving strategic, real world, problems in their local community, a much greater likelihood exists that they will significantly advance citizenship, social justice and the public good” (p. 33).

Additionally, this should encourage higher education researchers and practitioners to wonder if we are starting from the wrong place. Starting from the higher education institution sends the research in multiple directions, but starting from the outcome of civic engagement will often bring researchers back to higher education. It is now an important step to find out why, how, and more cases indicating where those conditions are still present.

References


Authors

JOHN C. BURKHARDT is professor of clinical practice and director of the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good at the University of Michigan. From 1993 to 2000 he was a program officer at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation directing the foundation’s grant making in leadership and transformational change.

ELIZABETH HUDSON is a doctoral student at the University of Michigan’s Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. Her research interests include the relationship between higher education and society, locally created educational values, and research methods. Currently she serves as a research assistant for the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good.