
Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civic Engagement

Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter & Neig Schwartzbach,
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This book is one in a series titled, 'Transformations in higher education: Scholarship of engagement' that address issues of campus-community partnerships in the United States. It presents profiles of a dozen academic professionals working at Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in New York State who have pursued collaborative education and research for tangible public benefit. Each profile includes a biographical account of how that person came to do his or her work, and a narrative about one of their projects. Half of the profiles feature social scientists and half natural scientists.

Cornell is one of about one hundred institutions in the American land grant system, which was created by federal legislation in the later 1800s to improve public welfare, especially that of farmers and rural communities. In 1914, this purpose was institutionalised through the Smith-Lever Act, which created and still funds the Cooperative Extension System, where 'extension agents' communicate between campus academics and off-campus constituencies.

While the authors of this volume argue that early extension work was collaborative in process and democratic in purpose, during the post-World War II era, many people viewed it more narrowly as technical assistance to commodity agriculture producers. Since the nation now has an abundance of cheap basic foodstuffs, the population is more urban and environmental concerns are rising, support for the land grant system is faltering. In this book, Peters, Alter and Schwartzbach seek to recover the original vision of the land grant system, and show how academics and their partners are anticipating and addressing issues such as wildlife management, rural school quality, urban neighbourhood development, pesticide use on golf courses and organic farming, as well the concerns of dairy farmers.

Of the people profiled, some have appointments as extension educators, some as non-tenure-track faculty members and some as tenure-track faculty members. Most of them never aspired to be 'ivory tower' academics, and incrementally found ways to partner

with people in the 'real world'. In the process, they reshaped their academic roles into something new, something we recognise now as engaged scholarship, or in the authors' words, as 'public work'.

Formulating, conducting and interpreting research relevant to their partners is central to many of the people profiled. For instance, Anu Rangarajan developed a guide for researchers on crop rotation based on discussions among a group of leading organic growers. Molly Jahn believes 'with the kind of conviction akin to missionary zeal that fundamental and applied science ... are highly synergistic ways of viewing the world'. She publishes in top academic journals and releases commercially successful crop varieties. And Frank Rossi not only draws on his own research, but also builds 'on ramps and off ramps' to the research of colleagues who won't interpret results for laymen or make policy decisions.

All of them report that their work requires not just technical expertise but also, crucially, organising ability, which was not typically part of their professional training. In some cases, the organising is relatively simple, for example where existing networks intersect through a trusted academic, such as Rossi, who is the 'expert in the middle' of heated conflicts about turf management among golf-course supervisors, environmentalists and regulators. In a couple of cases, academics helped organise one side of an explicit political conflict, as when Tom Lyson joined the opposition to school consolidation in Freeville, and Ken Reardon supported the cause of the mostly immigrant Essex Street merchants in New York City against the redevelopment plans of then Mayor Edward Koch.

Most commonly, however, they organise less sophisticated, decentralised, emerging or abandoned agricultural producers into professional associations and attempt to advise them in ways that serve both the producers and the public. For instance, Tom Maloney founded Pro-Dairy to improve management on farms that were growing from family operations to larger businesses; it now helps farms respond to Hispanic workforces pressing for collective bargaining and overtime pay. Marvin Pritts started what became the New York Berry Growers Association to serve decentralised berry growers in ways comparable to the associations for the more centralised apple and grape growers. The association now certifies berries cultivated using Integrated Pest Management methods.

As a horticulturalist, Rangarajan recognised the importance of organic farmers, even though they constituted less than one per cent of the state's growers, and historically had been overlooked by the university. She helped create what became the Northeast Organic Network (NEON) to facilitate that relationship and to sponsor funded research. Jahn, who is involved in plant breeding and genetics, was undeterred when her successful open-pollinated winter squash was dropped from the product line of the seed company which distributed it, as the company had merged into a larger entity that would only carry hybrids for a global market.

Jahn founded the Public Seed Initiative, connecting smaller seed companies and growers with public-sector germ plasma. The effort has been applauded by the United States Department of Agriculture and similar efforts are starting in other regions of the country.

The vision, energy and accomplishments of all 12 people profiled are impressive and inspiring. Their stories are diverse, rich and complex – an encouragement to any academic wondering what an engaged career would look like. Moreover, the satisfaction they take in their work should be heartening to people who feel they have to sacrifice their personal lives to do engaged work. Jahn is especially articulate on this point: by pursuing collaborative research, rather than the rat race of ‘big science’, she was able to study interesting questions, get funding, make a societal contribution and enjoy her personal life.

The authors provide these profiles as appreciative examples of people doing engaged work; they give some historical context at the beginning and some draw out lessons at the end. They do not delve into the problems of this work, although several are mentioned in the profiles, especially the erosion of belief in and support for the public sector. Instead, the authors invite their readers to reflect on these stories and learn what can illuminate their own work.

Administrators and funders should take note of the vitality here, and encourage similar efforts. In so doing, they will promote a democratic way of life where people work together to understand and address shared problems. In the words of Truman’s 1946 President’s Commission on Higher Education, such a way of life would enable academics to ‘deploy technical expertise and judgment not only skillfully, but also for public regarding ends in a public regarding way’.