Higher Engagement and Civic Engagement: Comparative Perspectives

Lorraine McIlrath, Ann Lyons & Ronaldo Munck (eds), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012, 268 pages

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Higher engagement and civic engagement is a broadly conceived, readable introduction to engagement in the higher education sector. The book's foreword and introduction provide clear contexts for contemporary university engagement from an international point of view.

In a world in which the north–south divide is arguably becoming more pronounced, where capitalism's economic cycles continue to generate crises such as the GFC and where globalisation has unequal impacts across the world, societies struggle with problems ranging from climate change to youth alienation. These challenges are knowledge intensive. Universities are knowledge-intensive institutions that have vital roles to play in addressing these challenges.

Civic engagement, the foreword notes, is not an add-on or something that primarily generates warm and fuzzy feelings. It is, or should be, a core function of the modern university. It should be seen as one of the three areas of university activity: teaching and learning, research, and engagement, or at the very least be embedded in the other two spheres.

Pedagogically, and in terms of international networking, universities have much to gain through civic engagement. Higher education is central to the formation of engaged, critical and global citizens. These citizens contribute to the evolution of 'cosmopolitan communities of community activists' as well as to the professions, which has implications for conceptualising models of civic, community and other engagement. Further, the 'massification' of tertiary education – involving the growth in socioeconomic diversity among students, rapid technological change, social networking and the knowledge economy's increasing demand for high-level skills – has a complex relationship with engagement.

The entangled relationship between higher education, the state and the private sector has other implications for engagement. The nature of research in universities, for example, is changing. Application, rather than academic imperative, is driving more and more of the research conducted, and therefore engagement

needs to be considered in terms of community need. The focus has to shift from knowledge economies to knowledge societies (p. xiv). As noted in the foreword, 'If the university is not an ivory tower, nor an extension of the business world, then it needs to be socially embedded' (p. xvi).

The collection is divided into three sections. The first covers context and concepts. Chapter 1 discusses the 'glocally' grounded university, with a focus on North Dublin, arguing that globalisation only becomes operationalised at the local level. Looking at South Africa, Chapter 2 examines higher education as a driver for social transformation. Chapter 3 explores alignment and its role in achieving civic engagement agendas in Ireland, and the last chapter of the section discusses civic engagement in the West.

Section two – manifestations and issues – looks initially, in Chapter 5, at community-based participatory research through the lens of a case study of the Boilerhouse at the University of Queensland in Australia. Chapter 6 examines the benefits of civic engagement to students and universities, while also discussing the difficulties of developing an international language of engagement. The following chapter considers student volunteering through the ALIVE program at the National University of Ireland. Chapter 8 focuses on service-learning from a community partner perspective.

Section 3 reflects on practice. The University of Grenada provides a case study of faculty use of service-learning pedagogy in Chapter 9, while the following chapter reports on the results of a survey of civic engagement activities in Irish higher education. The Latin American experience is treated in Chapter 11, and service and community engagement at the American University in Beirut is the focus of Chapter 12. The final chapter provides a case study of the Beacons for Public Engagement project in the UK.

Usefully, this book contends and clearly demonstrates that civic engagement is not a 'one-size-fits-all' pedagogy. It acknowledges continuing difficulties in the field. Civic engagement, community engagement and service-based learning can have different meanings in different places over time and the terms are sometimes conflated. The point here, perhaps, is to acknowledge the historical, cultural and geographical contexts in which engagement occurs rather than become bogged down in debates over definitions. There also needs to be more open discussion about the politics of civic and other forms of engagement which can range from radicalism to conservatism. All this is encouraged by the editors and authors of this book, which is an original and provocative contribution to an emerging field.