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Review of Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement: Walking a Fine Line edited by Amy E. Lesen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015)

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Abstract

Book Review: Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement: Walking a Fine Line edited by Amy E. Lesen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015)

Author Biography

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Keywords

civic engagement, academic research, higher education

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The editor of this book, Amy E. Lesen, organized a National Science Foundation-funded symposium in New Orleans in November 2010 concerning the topic of academic scholarship and its influence on the public realm, among other associated themes. Lesen and her collaborators called the symposium *Walking a Fine Line: Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement*, and it was this event that provided the inspiration for this book, part of the Ashgate Studies in Environmental Policy and Practice Series. In her preface, Lesen explains that several of the chapters center on New Orleans because the motivation for it emerged in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Many of the contributing authors attended the *Fine Line* symposium, and in it, grapple with the ideas of public engagement, scholarship, activism, and community work. These eight authors hail from a broad range of academic disciplines, and extrapolate their conclusions to the opportunities and challenges of their particular fields.

This book's eight chapters are equally broken up into two parts, the first of which is titled "Civically Engaged Academicians: Theories, Challenges, and Opportunities." In the first chapter of part one, Richard Campanella suggests that a "fine line" must be walked between research and advocacy. He presents two schools of thought on the matter; first, that some may believe academics to be obligated to fight for an equitable and sustainable society and, second, that others conclude that civic engagement distracts academics from their primary task of knowledge production and dissemination. Campanella concedes the contrast to be accurate and its concerns valid. His supposition is that "Both views may be reconciled not by forcing civic engagement upon academics, nor by banning it, but by capitalizing on the beneficial side and minimizing the detrimental" (p. 10).

In the two chapters that follow, Amy Koritz and Margaret Olsen consider the status of civic engagement in higher education, with Koritz investigating how the organization and delivery of knowledge affects it. Olsen focuses on the practical side of incorporating civic engagement into the classroom. Koritz, who is an English professor, introduces her chapter on "Science and the Liberal Arts in a Democracy" with an observation that a common complaint of scientists who teach in liberal arts colleges is a lack of interdisciplinary collaboration; that the demands of a curriculum trump any hope of that. "Faculty time must be bought out in order to achieve anything other than a relatively linear and compartmentalized delivery of courses focused towards a major. Attempts to alter this status quo by faculty members themselves, by academic administrators, or by external organizations such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities run up against discipline-serving structures. These are, finally, where a faculty member finds an institutional home, where she will build a career as a teacher and researcher, and where—should she be one of the lucky few—her tenure will be decided" (p. 13).

In her chapter “Somewhere Between the Ideal and the Real, the Civic Engagement ‘Expert’ Learns and Lets Go,” Olsen makes the point that incorporating civic engagement in the classroom requires flexibility of the instructor, and a willingness to reconsider the traditional structured classroom experience. She maintains that “The decentering of the traditional college classroom is as important to nourishing democracy as are collaborations between higher education and local communities, when properly conceived” (p. 40). In a memorable passage, she references a condition she refers to as “analysis paralysis,” mentioning that students often need to be coaxed out of over-thinking and over-analyzing problems of society in order to amend them.

In chapter four, “Community Enrollment: Colleges and the Fault Lines Between Academic and Civic Engagement,” Stephen Tremaine posits that higher education should recognize what it does well and look for “opportunities to make that talent of greater social use” (p. 47). He challenges us to ask – what more can higher education do for society? His brainchild, the Bard Early College in New Orleans (BECNO), does just that, providing college courses for underserved high school students in the city.

The second part of the book, entitled “How We Engage: Modes of Participation, from Digital Social Media to Radical Democracy,” delves into actual approaches to engagement. In Janice Cumberbatch’s piece, “Effective Engagement: Critical Factors of Success,” she is driven by her research question that queries whether or not participation really works. Several factors influence the effectiveness of participation, namely how it is defined in the project, potential participants, implementers, funders, project design, social context, and the available resources. Cumberbatch arranged these factors in a checklist for future use in the “design, monitoring and evaluation of participatory projects” (p. 79).

Kristina Peterson’s chapter revolves around participatory action research, highlighting the significance of the partnership between researchers and the people they’re trying to help. “Truly participatory work results in co-learning by all parties and offers a venue for building long term relationships as well as a foundation of data and resources on which future work can be based” (p. 98). The next chapter is tremendously enlightening, in which she and Lesen, the volume’s editor, converse with Albert P. Naquin, Chief of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians. Peterson has worked with Chief Albert in the past and gained the trust of his tribe. The conversation with Chief Albert offers invaluable insight on how to most effectively provide assistance to, or conduct research with, a population where you might be considered an outsider. Unsurprisingly, he insists that it is critical to find out what is important to the community in order to connect with them. This can be achieved through thoughtful dialogue and discussion, asking questions with genuine intention. The conversation touches on the “agenda

difference” that exists between researchers and populations under observation; this appears to be one of the predominant barriers to authentic partnership.

Lesen concludes the book with a literature review on the use of social media for science communication, and the effect it has on public engagement. Some limitations are listed, but overall, the ability of scientists to use this technology to appeal to the general public, increasing the interest, trust, and relevance of science in their everyday lives, is a huge development. Lesen notes that the two platforms making the most impact are Twitter and blogging.

The themes of dialogue, democracy, and deliberation are central to this book. The first-hand accounts provide the reader with the toolkit necessary to “explore the tension between idealized goals for civic engagement and the practical reality of engagement endeavors” (p. 27). Regarding civic engagement and higher education, a passage from Olsen’s chapter states it plainly: “The ethical dimension of civic engagement is really the foundation of its practice” (p. 30). By ethics, she refers to the necessity of people understanding that they are thoroughly involved in the political and socioeconomic processes of societies, and in the development of their relationship to communities unlike their own. For how else can we understand others, without first understanding where they come from, where we come from, and the difference between the two?

This book will have the most significance to those whose research supports making a positive, meaningful impact on society. It provides compelling content that appeals to a broad range of professionals extending from teachers to scientists to researchers, or those particularly interested in the field of environmental science, or civic engagement. Much of this book contains practical applications and examples of how to be an ambassador of change; and although it was written with “fellow scholars” in mind, I believe that Lesen’s objective that “this book will be both valuable and informative for those outside the academy who collaborate with academics, or who are looking for evidence of scholars wishing to do work that is useful and enriches lives of our fellow citizens” is warranted (p. xx). Within these chapters lies yet another helpful blueprint for bridging academia and the broader world.