



Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (New Directions for Community Colleges, Number 173)

Ronan, Bernie and Kisker, Carrie, eds.
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Book Review

Tags: civic learning | engaged teaching | teaching for transformation

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New Directions in Community Colleges, may be an unfamiliar journal to many scholars in theology and religion, but growing interest in community colleges as transformational contexts warrants attention. This edition presents scholarship on ethical and pedagogical issues of civic engagement in higher education. Recording workshops at the Kettering Foundation convened by Derek Barker collaborating with editors, Ronan and Kisker, these authors share the conviction that higher education should promote democratic values. Without fully acknowledging controversial aspects of that claim, they explore common ground working for social mobility, civic agency, and democratic practices such as voting, public discourse, and advocacy.

Contributors reflect on two reports, both published in 2012: “Advancing Civic Learning,” representing the work of the U.S. Department of Education, and “A Crucible Moment,” written by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, work of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. Both reports address educational goals of preparing engaged citizens who transfer civic skills like capacities for communicating, leading, organizing, and advocating from the classroom to workplace, public, and personal settings. Furthermore, the integration and assessment of civic learning and democratic engagement across educational programs from formal curriculum to extracurricular opportunities offered insight for building institutional support or resources for others innovative programs.

For instance, Carrie Kisker surveyed sixty community colleges asking whether civic engagement was a goal stated in missions or strategic plans with dedicated infrastructure and incentives in tenure or advancement process. She found diversity of approaches but high level

of integration in curriculum and encouragement in extracurricular programs. However, her findings document a lack of a standardized instrument to assess civic engagement and the need for more study of institutionalized support. Other highlights include David Matthews's proposed deliberative pedagogy which he linked to timely questions about authority and legitimacy in the public mandate for institutions of higher education. For example, John J. Theis cited the problems of people losing confidence in each other and in institutions, drawing on Carcasson's work noting that the "expert model" usually dominates higher education in ways that disempowers collective action (43). The authors connect their work as educators with enduring questions of ethics, cultural identities, and inequality.

Significant numbers of students learning about religious studies and theology are enrolled in classes at community colleges with more racial and economic diversity than most seminary or elite college and university classes. Despite the lack of prestige or attraction these settings may have for many faculty, community colleges are rich in ability to shape citizens and hence the future of our communities. Furthermore, although many seminaries and religious studies departments compete fiercely and perpetuate bitter rivalries to attract students, community colleges seem better able to collaborate with each other and learn together in ways institutions for teaching religion and theology would do well to study. Since religious institutions also need leaders with civic competencies, theological educators concerned with the future will find the journal provocative. Especially those educators committed to promoting the common good, social justice, and public engagement will benefit from reading this book.

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