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Spring 2013

# Pushing Back the Rhetoric: A Review of What Community Engagement Can Do

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### Repository Citation

Butin, D. W., & Saud, D. (2013). Pushing Back the Rhetoric: A Review of What Community Engagement Can Do. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 19(2), 89-94.

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## Review Essay

### Pushing Back the Rhetoric: A Review of What Community Engagement Can Do

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*Pushing Back the Gates: Neighborhood Perspectives on  
University-Driven Revitalization in West Philadelphia*

Harley F. Etienne  
Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012

*College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*

Andrew Delbanco  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012

On November 12 and 13, 2012, the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania celebrated its 20th anniversary. An academically star-studded group of college and university presidents, scholars, and public policy leaders partook of a series of panels and plenary sessions on topics such as *Community Economic Development and Education, Citizenship and Democracy*. The events highlighted what Ira Harkavy, the director of the Center since its founding, has long argued: that partnerships between schools, communities, and institutions of higher education are central to the revitalization and democratization of our public sphere (see, for example, Harkavy, 2006; Harkavy, Hartley, Weeks, & Bowman, 2011; Hartley & Harkavy, 2011).

The next day, on November 14, 2012, in a different part of town, the School District of Philadelphia's School Reform Commission met to vote on the sale of a dozen vacant district properties to generate revenue to offset a \$300 million budget gap in its fiscal year budget. One of the properties happened to be the old West Philadelphia High School on 48th and Walnut streets, just a brisk ten minute walk (.9 miles on Google Maps) from the President's House on the University of Pennsylvania campus. While no final decision was made at that meeting on the \$6 million bid, the rumor was that the University of Pennsylvania was looking to purchase the building for renovation into graduate student housing. This seemed to be well received by some, as one meeting

attendee noted, "We hope that West Philadelphia can be a model for the rest of the country for how a university can work with its neighborhood" (Shrum, 2012). (The sale was approved at the Commission's December 20th meeting.)

The question, it seems to us, is what exactly is this "model" of university-school-community partnerships? What kind of impact and import do service-learning, civic engagement, and other forms of community-based teaching and learning offer to their local communities and neighborhoods? What is the connection, if any, between a seemingly well-deserved celebration of two decades of community engagement and partnerships by the University of Pennsylvania and the fire sale of an iconic neighborhood building to that same university?

Interestingly, the two books under review may provide, in their own ways, an answer. To preview this answer, this is what Harley Etienne (2012) argues in *Pushing Back the Gates*:

I contend that a significant part of Penn's interest in neighborhood revitalization and change is its need for its real estate investments to succeed. Success is focused not on profit but on creating amenities to satisfy the discriminating tastes of top students and faculty. (p. 11)

To bolster this claim, Etienne cites Andrew Delbanco's (2007) *New York Review of Books* essay "Scandals of Higher Education." That essay forms

the foundation for Delbanco's (2012) recent and popular book *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, in which he concludes that "A college should [be]...where they [students] discover that self-interest need not be at odds with concern for one another. We owe it to posterity to preserve and protect this institution. Democracy depends on it" (p. 177).

Indeed, democratic up-building is exactly what the Netter Center appears to be celebrating: that institutions of higher education are one of the few sites in neighborhoods, communities, and societies—what Harkavy has termed "anchor institutions"—that support the revitalization of the public sphere through deliberate democratic engagement, public scholarship, and partnerships. These are noble sentiments and goals and many of the recent major policy reports in higher education trumpet the value and relevance of civic engagement exactly in this way (e.g., National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

And yet, it is difficult to dismiss the connection—no matter how chronologically and geographically coincidental—between the Netter Center celebration and the sale of the old West Philadelphia High School building. We thus want to probe this serendipitous connection between, as Delbanco phrases it, "self-interest" and "concern for one another" through a critical review of these two books and the implications thereof for how to define success in community engagement.

### Who Benefits in *Pushing Back the Gates*?

Etienne begins his book with a provocative question: "For whom did Penn save West Philadelphia?" (p. 6). Interestingly, and frustratingly, he never really answers his own question. Instead, through a qualitative case study of the University of Pennsylvania's relations with its surrounding West Philadelphia community, Etienne offers a nuanced approach, neither demonizing nor cheerleading, of what may or may not be possible for an elite institution to accomplish: "How can one university undo a century of urban social isolation, racism, the residue of inadequate social services and public infrastructure, and persistent poverty? If it wanted to, would it even be possible" (pp. 62-63)?

While Etienne, an assistant professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Michigan, does not specifically cite or draw upon critical race theorizing for his theoretical framework, his arguments mirror the ideas of how white privilege and structural racism play out across urban spaces; "The spatial reorganization of urban space by a university in the name of revitalization," he argues, "symbolizes the knowledge economy's marginalization of the

poor and already disenfranchised" (p. 12).

Etienne employs a wide range of archival documents and in-depth interviews with dozens of neighborhood members and university faculty and staff to suggest that Penn's neighborhood revitalization efforts and motives are self-serving at the very same time as they attempt to serve others. As he suggests, "Penn's view of its role overstates its importance in reversing urban decline...Penn served as the promoter, not the master engineer" (p. 75).

On the one hand there is nothing really surprising about this point. We are all ensconced within complex and often competing notions of the good, acting without fully understanding how unintended consequences may all too often overwhelm and undermine our most cherished visions and missions. Etienne says as much in his preface as he comments on the book's cover photo of a plant poking out of a sidewalk crack; it "becomes a metaphor for the relationship between a large university and its neighbors...[it] attempts to show different perspectives on how a well-intentioned university might fail to see how life will push through its plans" (p. xiii).

Yet what is surprising is how clearly Etienne builds his case. He first offers a short history of Penn's relationship with its ever-changing neighborhoods before showing how the 1996 stabbing murder of Vladimir Sled, a researcher at the university, forced a fundamental rethinking in the university's approach to neighborhood revitalization. As Etienne tells it, the murder

exposed long-standing tensions and anxieties about the urban crime that many West Philadelphians had come to accept as their way of life. At a meeting with concerned parents during the university's homecoming weekend a few weeks later, then Penn president Judith Rodin and then Philadelphia mayor Edward G. Rendell were booed off the stage as they tried to assuage the crowd's fears about crime in the area. Rodin and Rendell had known of West Philadelphia's problems and were developing a plan to improve public safety in the area. Nevertheless, they were given their marching orders to clean up the crime or lose students. (pp. 13-14)

The university turned to Harkavy and the Netter Center, which had already been doing important work in the local community for over a decade. In effect, the murder crystallized and galvanized much greater support through an explicit commitment by and support from Penn's president and provost for the Netter Center. The Center, Etienne argues, became the "focal point for all of Penn's university-community relations, and its philosophy and staff have influenced the university's engagement with and efforts in West Philadelphia in virtually every way" (p. 25).

## What College Never Was

Etienne goes on to provide short synopses of a wide range of initiatives that changed and often even transformed local neighborhoods at the same time that they enhanced the university's image and physical footprint. The vision, if not the implementation, of such urban revitalization energized, vindicated, and, Etienne argues, rested "with a small core of individuals with resilient beliefs in democracy and the civic use of higher education" (p. 24).

But such success, Etienne suggests, may be pyrrhic. In a key conceptual move, Etienne draws on sociological theory to contrast "whether 'race' or 'space' plays a more dominant role in defining the life chances of inner-city African Americans" (p. 89), and ends up arguing that "liberal/structural analysis tends to...[support] policy that avoids human development in favor of place development" (p. 90). By analytically focusing on "place" as the key variable of what constitutes and perpetuates societal inequities, he suggests, we leave unquestioned and unexposed the white privilege and institutional racism that disables what happens to disenfranchised communities living in those spaces.

In the end, Etienne is very clear that higher education is an industry with competing interests and goals. At the same time that it attracts quality faculty it must also cater to student wants, act as a driver of local economic growth, and function as a real estate developer. These are messy, expensive, time-constrained, and politically-fraught endeavors where universities must constantly work with local constituencies. It is thus telling that Etienne's findings highlight the "interest convergence" of dominant groups' desires of neighborhood revitalization with community engagement: "Without figures such as Harkavy and [then UPenn President] Rodin, plans for campus expansion and development appear as opportunistic land grabs with no real or suggested benefits for adjacent communities" (p. 107).

These are tough words with tougher implications. For while Etienne never explicitly links his narrative or arguments to the literature of critical race theorizing (e.g., Bell, 1979; Milner, 2008; Yosso, 2005), the implications of the convergence between our self-interests and the success of "the other" raises some uncomfortable realities—namely, it forces us to consider our positionality as scholars, practitioners, and activists in an academy where the gap between rhetoric and reality may be wide and deep. It suggests that there is a fundamental dilemma at the heart of the civic engagement enterprise within higher education: that for all of our good will and good acts, we must always be wary of being co-opted in an enterprise not of our making, our choosing, or our intentions. Universities, it appears, may be pushing back the proverbial gates for distinctively non-democratic reasons.

The realization of and need to grapple with such a dilemma makes reading Andrew Delbanco's book so much more frustrating. Delbanco, the Mendelson Family Chair of American Studies and the Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, is a longtime pundit of the "scandals" of higher education at such publications as the *New York Review of Books* and the *New York Times Magazine*. College, he suggests, has become about everything but "the cultivation of human powers," which is supposedly what liberal education does at its best and most powerful.

We have, he suggests, focused on climbing walls, dining halls, and sporting events to the detriment of "this kind of intimate and intense education" which "is threatened and already rare" (Delbanco, 2007). In Delbanco's narrative arc, higher education is doomed because of the standard litany of complaints: research-oriented faculty who care nothing about teaching, students who care only about grades, universities that care only about rankings.

It is beyond the scope of this review to dismantle this notion of a long-lost golden era except, perhaps, to note that the history of higher education is one of concomitant exclusionary and stultifying practices and policies (see, for example, Butin, 2005; Karabel, 2005; Mullen, 2010). We can probably all agree with Delbanco that the life of the mind—"of what a college should strive to be: an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others" (pp. 15-16)—is a lovely sentiment and a noble goal. But to suggest that such a "place and process" ever existed beyond the reach of a truly miniscule group is simply inaccurate.

This is not to say that today is any better. Higher education is going through massive disruptions linked to the explosion of an increasingly diverse population of students entering an ever-more splintered set of postsecondary pathways delivered in drastically different ways (Brown, 2008; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Mazoué, 2012; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Schwier, 2012; Thille, 2012). From the rise of for-profit providers to the proliferation of online learning to the drastic decline in tenure-stream faculty lines, higher education as a place and a process is more a kaleidoscope of change rather than a pinpoint of clarity.

But Delbanco does not talk about any of this. Instead, at the conclusion of his book, where one would hope for insights into, as he says, what college "is and should be," Delbanco offers this summation: "Perhaps the brightest spot in the contemporary

landscape of American higher education is the resurgence of interest in engaging students in civic life beyond campus” (p. 175). He then offers the reader an example.

On a recent visit to the University of Tulsa, I learned that the university provides up to eight hours per month of paid leave for staff who wish to devote that time to community service. Such actions bespeak a recognition that in any genuine community—an aspiration fundamental to the original conception of college—self-interest and public interest are not at odds, but are two names for the same thing...A college should not be a haven from worldly contemplation, but a place where young people fight out among and within themselves contending ideas of the meaningful life, and where they discover that self-interest need not be at odds with concern for one another. We owe it to posterity to preserve and protect this institution. Democracy depends on it. (pp. 176-177)

This is a strange way to conclude this kind of a book. Delbanco has spent one hundred and seventy five pages extolling the virtues and vitality of the liberal arts and how such a conception is critical to democracy. He is inspired by the words of W.E.B. Dubois—“The true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes”—and envisions that college is critical to “educate citizens in our republic” (p. xiv).

Yet the piece of real-world evidence that Delbanco offers to make this entire edifice come alive is a human resources policy that gives some time off for staff to do community service. Really? To be clear, we believe that micropractices and institutional structures—such as the referenced human resources policy—offer insights for how to enact counter-practices that may foster local and global change (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Foucault, 2002; Latour, 1987). But Delbanco was surely not referencing a Foucauldian analysis of the microethnographic details of a cultural shift in the academy’s episteme when he referenced the University of Tulsa. He simply liked the idea that staff got time off to do “good deeds.”

This is a disappointing conclusion. Such outcomes are surely not what the attendees of the Netter Center were celebrating. This raises in sharp relief the question of what exactly is it that college can or should do. Delbanco certainly prods our spirits about the value of a liberal arts education, one that supports a critical and deliberative thoughtfulness. But irrespective of whether one sides with, for example, Amy Gutmann’s broad liberalism (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) or Stanley Fish’s (2008) deflationary academizing about what college can or cannot do, it seems

important to develop a clear and critical line between the rhetoric and the actions of the engaged campus (Butin & Seider, 2012)—which, unfortunately, Delbanco does not do.

## Implications

In one respect, it is unfair to lambast Delbanco’s book. He is writing for a general audience, arguing for a noble vision of higher education, fulminating against what he sees as the invading corporate mentality of higher education. And yet, such romanticizing maintains the illusion that if we could only, just only, find our way back to the power and glory of a liberal education, we would be made whole again.

Harkavy has similarly argued for the transformational power of higher education, and as such, for the need to transform higher education. To cite but one such articulation, Harkavy argues that

To become part of the solution, higher eds must give full-hearted, full-minded devotion to the hard task of transforming themselves to becoming socially responsible, civic universities. To do that well, they will have to change their institutional cultures and develop a comprehensive, realistic strategy. (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2000, p. 29)

But “full-hearted, full-minded devotion” is almost impossible to align with a “comprehensive, realistic strategy” in the real world. As Etienne noted about Penn’s community engagement strategy, “the enterprise of university-community relations has been duplicated and fostered in so many different corners of the university that it is impossible for the Netter Center to control or even influence the work of various faculty members, groups, and administrative units” (p. 25). To put it otherwise, there was never a whole cloth to begin with given the widely disparate units at the University of Pennsylvania with their own respective goals and methods.

It is without doubt that Harkavy’s ideal has been and continues to be a driving force for bringing international attention to the power of community engagement, and his vision has energized, as the 20th anniversary event demonstrates, an entire generation of scholars, practitioners, and policy makers to strive for a better world. But it must be noted—as there was just one day and .9 miles separating the two events—that the Netter Center’s success cannot be disentangled from the complexities and realities of urban decline in West Philadelphia. For Penn and the Netter Center, their vaunted relationship and presence in the local community rests on the actual partnerships developed and sustained.

And this is where it gets difficult. For such partnerships are actually minute within the context of an

institution the size of the University of Pennsylvania. Harkavy has recently argued for a “democratic devolution” whereby higher education institutions contribute “systematically to improving the quality of life and learning in their local communities” (Harkavy & Hodges, 2012, p. 1). To make his point, Harkavy uses his institution as a model:

Since 1985...more than 160 academically based community service (ABCS) courses (Penn’s approach to service-learning) have been developed. ABCS courses integrate research, teaching, learning, and service around action-oriented, community problem solving. For example, university students work on improving local schools, spurring economic development on a neighborhood scale, and building strong community organizations. At the same time, they reflect on their service experience and its larger implications (e.g., why poverty, racism, and crime exist). In 2011-2012, more than 1,600 Penn students (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) and 56 faculty members (from 20 departments across 6 of Penn’s 12 schools) were engaged in West Philadelphia through these courses. (This represents significant growth since 1992, when three faculty members taught four ABCS courses to approximately 100 students.) (p. 5)

But while these numbers appear substantial, the percentages tell a somewhat different story: there appears to be a student body participation rate of 6% at the University of Pennsylvania (1,600 out of approximately 28,400 full-time undergraduate, graduate, and professional students) and a full-time faculty participation rate of 3% (56 out of 1930 full-time faculty with instruction as their primary area of focus) [the data of overall students and faculty are drawn from the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) from 2011]. Comparatively, Campus Compact institutions report 8% and 7%, respectively, for student and faculty participation in civic engagement initiatives (Campus Compact, 2012).

There are of course probably numerous methodological caveats and concerns to such an off-the-cuff comparison, but it seems to be problematic that the edifice for arguing for the transformation of higher education rests upon such minuscule numbers. Butin (2012) has recently argued that the community engagement movement has reached an “engagement ceiling” in its spread across higher education when one examines student, faculty, and institutional buy-in. Harkavy’s data appear, however unintentionally, to support this.

We of course believe that one can, and should, argue for transformational changes irrespective of

what norms abound in the academy. That is the function and power of the critical enterprise in higher education (Kelly, 2012). But when such arguments are formally and tightly linked to the practices that seemingly serve as exemplars, both the arguments and the practices must be reevaluated. For as Etienne points out about the University of Pennsylvania, and Delbanco (unintentionally) makes clear about colleges in general, “success” in the civic arena is a difficult proposition. From the pressures of city budget cycles to the happenstance of neighborhood crime, what higher education can accomplish through community engagement is an open question rather than an obvious answer. These may be uncomfortable points for a field committed to the social good (Ladson-Billings, 1989), but until and unless we carefully push back on what it is that community engagement can do, there may be little to celebrate a generation from now.

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