

**Review Of Higher Education And Civic Engagement:
Comparative Perspectives, By Lorraine McIlrath, Ann
Lyons, And Ronaldo Munck. Palgrave Macmillan,
2012.**

Maria Avila

University of Southern California

1. Review

The collection of papers included in this book offers a broad range of international perspectives on the work of higher education institutions as they endeavor to share knowledge, skills, and resources with the world outside their walls. In a field where engagement practices and methodologies, as well as the ultimate purpose of engagement, are still contested, the book assists readers in situating their own engagement work within a larger, international, theoretical context. The book also helps readers appreciate that while engagement practices will always vary, depending on geographical, political, economic, and social contexts, there are significant commonalities across countries and regions. To this end, most authors discuss their definition of civic/public engagement list some of the most common engagement activities, notwithstanding the fact that the terminology to name these activities varies amongst authors. The engagement activities mentioned include volunteerism and community service, curriculum connected community service, community based research, and knowledge transfer. Another commonality which is noted in the text is the challenges faced by engagement practitioners across countries and regions. The most apparent challenge, especially for service learning, is that the academy does not reward engagement activities. This is a significant message as the book includes perspectives from Middle East, South America, Australia, Africa, North America, and Europe.

One of the book's specific contributions is that it clearly contextualizes engagement between higher education and society within the larger, global dilemmas currently facing higher education as a sector, especially with regards the present economic challenges facing much of the world. To my knowledge, this larger context often informs the work of university senior administrators, but it does not always inform on-the-ground engagement practices by faculty, students, and staff. Yet, as Bawa and Munck state in the Foreword: "Universities could once assume a self-evident national remit and role in relation to the community they serve, but today higher education is now clearly part of a global system of knowledge generation and transmission, and increasingly, of a global labor market" (xvi). Another important contribution of the book is that it makes a statement about the necessity to include voices from the global South, to balance the Northern voices that now dominate much of the literature on the topic of engagement. While the majority of the chapters in the book are representative of the global North, one chapter focuses on South Africa and another on South America, evidence of the intentional inclusion of engagement models from these two regions for the contribution they make as opposed to for the sake of "doing the right thing" morally speaking. As Bawa and

Munck make clear, the promise that the magic of the market would uplift all those participating in the global economy, has sorely failed: the “realities of North-South differentials...are acute, and possibly deepening” (xii).

This political context offered in the Foreword promises much, however, this not always clear or apparent in the rest of the book, especially in some of the chapters focused on describing specific programs and models, or service as an engagement activity or service-learning as a pedagogy. However, some chapters do continue the political theme; the chapter on the American University of Beirut (AUB), by Myntti, Mabsout, and Zurayk is one example. As described in this chapter, AUB has approached engagement in response to “historical contexts that combine prevailing economic, political, and intellectual currents and, often, the exigencies of war and conflict” (206). The chapter explains that political means that faculty act as citizen-scholars, taking critical positions on larger social issues, and that they “encourage their students to engage in socially responsible community projects and research, and ultimately give them the hope that they can make a difference in their society and in the world” (citing Giroux and Giroux, 2006). While Myntti, Mabsout, and Zurayk acknowledge that there is no consensus on this political context of engagement at AUB, it is clear that there is space to engage in this type of challenging conversations about the political purpose of engagement, which is often missing in higher education institutions engaged with the off-campus community.

Another important element often missing in publications about engagement (and in engagement related conferences) is voices from those with whom universities engage outside of the academy. While McIlrath’s chapter on research with community partners quoted directly from community partners she interviewed, a paper written/narrated by community partners themselves would have illustrated the shift in knowledge creation and power dynamics that service learning aims to achieve. This absence aside, the book offers many lessons and conveys the passion and commitment from a rich array of voices from many different regions in the world.