Campus activism, community organizing, and civic engagement are all present topics in higher education. In her highly compelling book, *Transformative Civic Engagement Through Community Organizing*, Avila (2018) provides an innovative take on how community organizing can be practiced. This book offers the chance to question the purposes of higher education and the nature of civic engagement. Avila provides a personal and pragmatic understanding about how scholars can engage in community activism outside of the classroom. Ultimately, Avila uses her wealth of experience to display a number of effective practices for those that work in higher education and community organizing.

The foundation of this book is built on the experiences of Maria Avila’s life experiences including factory work in Ciudad Juarez, a decade organizing with the Industrial Areas Foundation, to several stops in higher education. Clear grounding in civic engagement literature provides relevance within the context of democratic engagement in higher education while Avila’s narrative and organizing experience offer an authentic, lived perspective of putting theory into practice. Avila declares the central theme of the book is, “community organizing can help create a culture that values and rewards civicly engaged scholarship, thus advancing higher education’s public, democratic mission” (2018, p. 16).

Avila establishes her position early on, saying, “I am a community organizer engaged in and committed to creating a culture in which higher education can fulfill a larger democratic purpose through civically engaged scholarship” (2018, p. 1). Avila first describes how the book reflects over ten years of community organizing experience and “cocreating spaces where democracy can be enacted and individual, institutional, and community transformation can occur (2018, p. 17). She makes the case for readers, and by extension community organizers, of how important it is to understand the world as it is so that they can be part of “creating the world as we would like it to be” (p. 3). This concept is at the core of Avila’s praxis and is a general theme throughout the text.

Chapter 2 explores Avila’s approach to community organizing, filled with concrete examples and stories from her work in higher education. Avila establishes four foundational community organizing practices developed over the course of her career. These four practices include: one-to-one meetings, creating a collective of leaders, analyzing power dynamics, and ongoing critical reflection (Avila, 2018). All four are paramount to Avila’s scholarship and community organizing work in higher education. However, one-to-one meetings are the most important because, she says, building relationships are a foundational praxis. “The main purpose of one-to-one meetings is to build public relationships; therefore, their tone is conversational, based on a genuine interest to learn about things that really matter to those with whom we meet” (Avila, 2018, p. 21). The other three principals are rendered ineffective without the establishment of relationships built on “genuine interest.” This section is rich with citations from prominent theorists and practitioners, including Gergen (1995), Gecan (2002), Osterman (2002), Nohria and Khurana (2010), Boyte (2009), and Mezirow (1990).

In chapter 3, Avila examines the history and contexts that were integral in the development of this approach to civic engagement, traveling back to her roots at Occidental College. She provides the reader with a number of anecdotes and examples from her time working to institutionalize community-based learning and research, fostering a culture that acknowledged civically engaged scholarship, and honoring the practice of reciprocal, mutually beneficial campus-community partnerships. In addition to examples from Occidental College, Avila speaks of her experiences at the University of Southern California (USC) and Ireland to provide firsthand accounts of building a campus-wide movement in higher education. A personal anecdote particularly interesting was having over 100 one-to-one meetings in a single academic year. The chapter ends with a reflection about the challenges that Avila faced and a summary of accomplishments in community organizing, including what she considers to be her most important accomplishment: “the creation of a culture that values and rewards reciprocal civic
engagement” (p. 55). She describes this accomplishment as the result of a “slow, intentional, and strategic process” (p. 55).

Chapter 4 engages in a discussion about neoliberalism and its impacts on higher education and community organizing. Avila relies on Duggan’s (2007) definition of neoliberalism as a “utopian ideology” that focuses on the proliferations of free markets and minimal state interference (p. 45). Avila draws a clear connection between the corporatization of higher education and its impact on civic engagement. Avila frames neoliberalism from an international perspective, influenced by her graduate studies, faculty appointments, and scholarship in both Ireland and the United States. According to Avila, the issue of market ideologies in higher education is far more complex and “and far from straight forward” (2018, p. 62). One example that highlights this complex relationship is the continued decrease of federal funding in higher education as a justification to seek funding from the business sector. Avila’s analysis draws from the work of Giroux (2015), Lynch, (2008), Newfield (2011), and others who have illustrated the undemocratic aspects of neoliberal ideologies in education. However, Avila considers the positive role that the business community can play in community organizing and community partnerships and notes, “Clearly, university-business partnerships are not all negative, just as the market is not all negative” (p. 65). Avila utilizes two stories from her time at Maynooth University and USC to illustrate how partnerships with community business can be beneficial in creating a culture of civic engagement. Positive examples of partnerships with the business sector required a great deal of compromise from all involved and transparent negotiation processes.

Avila concludes the book in chapter 5 by reflecting back on her work and offering lessons learned. She uses this chapter to suggest some closing thoughts and insights about her work in community organizing and the current state of higher education.

As I have experienced it, many academics, students, administrators, and community partners are open to being part of collective efforts that change the culture of the places where they work...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where...My hope is that more such change the culture of the places where. (Avila, 2018, p. 88).

The usefulness and practicality of this book is undeniable. Avila is not an academic isolationist and recognizes the need for community-campus partnerships. She says, “I remain committed to creating spaces where individual civic agency can be turned into collective agency, so that higher education institutions can live up to their public, democratic missions” (2018, p. 84). Colleges and universities are complex organizations. They operate under the guidance and authority of other organizations and individuals. Avila demonstrates the importance of community organizing as an integral component of the democratic mission of higher education.

Avila’s single figure in the text. A circle image of the four community organizing practices indicating the cyclical process of the need for, and connection between them, is reminiscent of Freire's (1970) praxis of action and reflection. The figure adds to Avila’s use of anecdotes, others voices, and her own experiences throughout to make her ideas clear and easily understandable.

As staff members in higher education, we see the practical recommendations that Avila provides as extremely relevant to our work. However, we are uncertain of how well this book will be for community organizers outside of higher education as a number of the examples and anecdotes may not apply to their situations.

We strongly recommend this book for anyone who is attempting to combine community organizing with their scholarship. Through the use of personal experiences and practical advice, Avila offers a text that is both deeply personal and profoundly universal. Avila’s reflections on her journey in community organizing in higher education are engaging as they provide lessons for newcomers to the field. For instance, she documents how civic engagement and scholarship are not mutually exclusive practices. As she makes clear in the opening chapter, they are interconnected and intersecting. The present is a critical time for this work, in light of the neoliberalism, xenophobia, and hate that are rampant in both society at large and on college campuses. There is a need for higher education to address these and other critical issues. Avila concludes with a glimpse into the transformative nature of community organizing, saying, “We can start this movement building one one-to-one meeting at a time, one leadership collective at a time, in one institution at a time, and in one community at a time” (2018, p. 89). For Avila, the change that can be achieved from community organizing in higher education may be incremental, but these incremental changes can constitute a more comprehensive organizational and societal transformation.
References


