Review of Creating Our Identities in Service-Learning and Community Engagement


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Among my colleagues who have recently published books, the process of finding the right title has been described as a wrestling match between author or editor, and publisher. The publisher wants a catchy title that conveys meaning about the content but compels the buyer to take a second look. Titling is a marketing decision. However for the author, titling is a manifestation of the author’s identity and authenticity. Titling is a personal statement. Often at odds, the commercial experience of the publisher tends to win out, which is pragmatically beneficial to the buyer who is trying to surmise the contents of the book.

In Creating Our Identities in Service-Learning and Community Engagement, it seems the editors won the naming game, which is unfortunate for the reader who likely assumes that the overarching theme of the book is identity, and each article explicitly speaks to an aspect of that theme. On the contrary, if identity is a theme in this book, it is subtle at best. The editors posit:

Both the practice of SLCE (service-learning and community engagement) and the research addressing SLCE are reaching a critical point at which stakeholders are deeply considering identity, whether dealing with institutional character, campus-community partnership relationships, student conceptualizations of their engagement, or the research field itself. The chapters below are grouped into four parts, representing different areas in which research questions are concerned with identity conceptualizations. (page x)
Still, a careful read of the introduction indicates that identity, specifically the issue of the struggle for identity within the field of service learning, is more a commentary on the state of the field by the editors rather than an explicit theme for the book.

While poorly titled, to overlook this book would be a mistake. Creating Our Identities in Service-Learning and Community Engagement is an important text that should be read by faculty, students, and administrators interested in the current work being produced by leading researchers in SLCE. The book is the ninth in the Advances in Service-Learning Research series that publishes a selection of papers presented at the annual meeting of the International Research Conference on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSCLE) through a peer-review process. This series has become known for publishing the best annual scholarship in SLCE. Shelley H. Billig (RMC Research Corporation) has served as an editor every year since the series was introduced in 2001 and the quality of the articles in the series has benefitted from that consistency.

This book is divided into four parts, subtitled Institutionalization of SLCE, Campus-Community Partnerships, Student Outcomes, and Perspectives on SLCE Research. Articles included are a lesson for what exceptional engaged scholarship looks like: well written, with sound methodologies, keen analysis, cleanly presented data, and significant findings.

In part one, the editors have present three papers exploring institutional dimensions of service-learning, specifically promotion and tenure policies, practices to support engaged scholarship, and faculty development. Part two includes two papers on community partnerships. Part three includes three papers focused on service-learning applications including K-12 service-learning standards in the School District of Philadelphia, a university and middle school mentoring program, and the influence of diversity on college students in the service learning experience. Finally, part four of the text contains four articles focused on research issues including the degree of interdisciplinarity in research, the keynote address from the IARSCLE in 2008 by Lori Vogelgesang on the challenges of research, international perspectives in research, and the intersections of research and practice in service-learning K-12 standards and indicators.

Much of the research in the book relates indirectly to partnerships. But part two is specifically focused on this subject. Emily M. Janke, in “Defining Characteristics of Partnership Identity in Faculty-Community Partnerships,” presents the only article in the text that explicitly addresses the issue of identity. Through her research, Janke develops an organizational framework for partnerships called Partnership Identity as defined by: a unified mission, feelings of membership in a distinctive entity, organizational structures, and expectations to endure changes in resources and membership. Grounded in social and organizational identity theory, this framework is a meaningful model for understanding the defining elements of partnerships and understanding the moment when collaboration advances to a mutually-identified partnership.
In the second article in part two, “Two-Dimensional Approach for Assessing Transformative Campus/Community Service-Learning Partnerships,” Jason T. Phillips and Cynthia V.L. Ward provide a framework for identifying and assessing the degree of transformation in service-learning partnerships using an inventive rubric called the Transformative Partnership Matrix. Phillips and Ward deftly integrate transformative partnership theory into the model and cite influential work leading to the development of the matrix. An assessment questionnaire was then developed. The research methodology, matrix, and assessment instrument provide a theoretically integrated approach for evaluating the collective community-campus impacts of partnerships.

For those doing research relating to partnerships, Creating Our Identities in Service-Learning and Community Engagement contains two directly relevant and formative chapters. Consequently, I recommend this text for faculty whose research is grounded in understanding and evaluating service-learning partnerships. Furthermore, this text and this series is a must read for keeping apprised of the current and exemplary research within the field of service-learning and community engagement.

References