

Book Review: *Transforming cities and minds through
the scholarship of engagement*

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Author Note

Hoyt, L. (Ed). (2001) *Transforming cities and minds through the scholarship of engagement*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press as reviewed by Harley Etienne, Urban and Regional Planning at A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning-University of Michigan.

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In his 1995 address to the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences, Ernest L. Boyer stated that it was the university that had helped grow the country and find the answers it needed in its darkest hours (1996). Less than one hundred years ago, he said, the university's mission was not yet divorced from such lofty ideals as *practicality*, *reality*, and *serviceability*. However, at some point, being isolated from public discourse became more important which has led to a crisis of confidence in the entire enterprise of higher education. The reward structure that was intended to promote and protect the intellects who dared to engage with the toughest questions of the day has incentivized (or terrorized) them to steer clear of public discourse. As a result, Boyer pointed out, some of the most important research that changed how we think about public policy issues such as the environment, gender, and poverty have not come from the academy but from those writing from beyond its walls.

With so much focus on the diminishing affordability of higher education to students and financial cuts to state-level appropriations to public universities, there is perhaps no crisis facing the academy receiving as little attention as the one highlighted by Lorlene Hoyt and her contributors. The academy has not focused its attention on a singular project in some time and has never invested ample attention in the numerous crises that have plagued American cities over the last century. Even in fields such as urban studies and planning, engagement with the most controversial social questions of the day is often sidestepped in favor of empirical studies of policy impacts and causality. What's more, students are often trained to view their relationships with the communities that they work on (not with) for master's thesis projects and capstone studios as one-sided data-gathering missions. The communities in which they find themselves for class projects are often defined as clients and informants—not partners with whom to share data, resources, and expertise. Students enter the space to gather information, produce reports, and move on with the credentials to recreate similar relationships in their professional lives.

Hoyt frames her book as a testament to her desire to produce academic research that is embedded in community action and change. For the work detailed in her book, students formed relationships with communities similar to the one they had access to through the MIT@ Lawrence Partnership and created master's thesis projects that would be illuminating to the students themselves and the communities they studied. Both at the beginning and end of the book is Hoyt's discussion of being denied tenure, a topic that is both complex and highly personal. It is

refreshing to see an academic book placed in a light that allows readers to see how it came to be—warts and all. The implications made by her discussion of her tenure denial is that many research-intensive universities are hostile to unorthodox ways of training students and/or community engagement.

It's quite possible that the very minds that may have been transformed by the interaction between students and communities in this book were those of the already converted. Gayle Christiansen's discussion of the bureaucratic nightmares small business owners and entrepreneurs confront daily in Camden, New Jersey, is comprehensive and compelling. As written, it could easily inform our understanding of the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in similar jurisdictions and markets. Nick Iuvine and Lily Song's description of cooperative economic development in Cleveland is a welcome addition to the literature on the subject which routinely misses the details. Leila Bozorg's case study of efforts to create sustainable development in Kansas City, Missouri, captures both the complex political landscape and the history and gives appropriate nods to Kansas City's civil rights and community leaders. The policy analysis of the federal programs and their relationship to the implementation efforts in Kansas City is commendable and well done. In her chapter, Marianna Leavy-Sperounis, carefully profiles a part of Massachusetts few know or understand well. She thoughtfully juxtaposes the city of Lawrence against its better-heeled cousin Lowell and presents a thorough analysis of how local agents invested in both cities to jumpstart their revivals. In the last two substantive chapters, Brandin and Levitt, and Mackres and Song provide perspectives on how efforts to retrofit the green infrastructure and create jobs in Oakland, California, and Lawrence, Massachusetts respectively require local organizing, engagement with local unions, state officials and communities.

There are some challenges with this book. Each chapter is written largely as a case study of an economic or community development issue in a challenging, often racialized, post-industrial context. While interesting, well-researched, and well-written, the chapters do not necessarily present accounts of engagement. The chapters varied in their approach to engagement, and some were more arms-length from their subjects than others. It would have been useful to better understand the relationships between the student researchers and the communities they profiled. Based on the citations in each chapter that demonstrate the extent to which the students depended on local knowledge to complete their projects, it would have been interesting and consistent with the theme of the book to discuss how they were

personally enlightened or changed by their experiences. It would have also been useful to know how the local communities viewed their interactions with the students and how they believed they and their communities benefitted from the presence of these student researchers. Yet, the students do better than most academics in framing the challenges many post-industrial, predominantly low-income and minority communities face.

Few, editors of anthologies written largely by academics would tell you that it's a simple task to gather multiple voices into a volume. The idea of asking students to turn their master's projects into chapters for an edited volume is a bold and rare move in the social sciences and humanities and perhaps in academia more broadly as well. It is truly pedagogical innovation that is sorely needed in this day and age. Hoyt and Vanderbilt University Press are to be commended for taking the risks that this volume represents. There is valuable information to be found within this volume that does not exist elsewhere and will be useful and interesting to practitioners and academics who are interested in communities such as the ones profiled in this book.

Reference

Boyer, Ernest L. 1996. "The Scholarship of Engagement" *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49(7): 18-33.

Author Biography



Harley Etienne is an Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning-University of Michigan. He teaches in the areas of urban community development, inner-city revitalization, neighborhood change, urban poverty, and qualitative research issues in planning. Etienne's research focuses primarily on the intersection of social institutions and their relationship to processes of urban neighborhood change. He is keenly interested in the role that colleges and universities play in contributing to neighborhood-level change and regional economic development. He recently released, *Pushing Back the Gates: Neighborhood Perspectives on University-Driven Change in West Philadelphia* on Temple University Press.