

A DIFFERENT KIND OF POLITICS

READINGS ON THE ROLE OF
HIGHER EDUCATION IN DEMOCRACY

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Across a range of fields, from health care to journalism, organizations have powerful incentives to reinforce a clear distinction between experts and citizens, even when they intend to fulfill public responsibilities. In this context, Albert W. Dzur, Associate Professor of Political Science at Bowling Green State University, reflects on the politics of public scholarship in an interview conducted by David Brown. According to Dzur, public scholarship is part of a larger movement toward "democratic professionalism," which sees collaboration with citizens as central to fulfilling professional and institutional responsibilities.

Brown: As I understand your term, *democratic professionalism*, it is when professionals "share authority" with members of the public "over tasks that affect them." Such professionals serve as "facilitators." Your studies focus on hospitals, clinics, newspapers, courtrooms, and correctional facilities. Where else is democratic professionalism asserting itself?

Dzur: I regularly work with graduate students in public administration and have noticed an increasing appreciation for the idea that they might become democratic professionals. They see the public as a somewhat chaotic force in the life of an administrator: the public can be ignorant about trade-offs that have to be made because of tight budgets, can be oblivious to the rules and regulations that constrain official action, and yet the public is, ultimately, "the boss," and, on good days, the reason one gets up in the morning to begin a new workday.

Additionally, they realize that conventional methods of communicating with their constituents are defunct: surveys, town-hall meetings, ad hoc

forums held to assuage fears are incapable of fostering meaningful two-way dialogue. Like the recent interest in the concept of public deliberation among public administration scholars, I think the idea of professionals collaborating with lay people in ongoing departmental decision making, in sponsoring community review boards and similar forums, has appeal for a new generation of practitioners. Speaking more generally, democratic professionalism aligns well with their preference for horizontal rather than vertical organizations.

Brown: Do you see more faculty members becoming attracted to such professionalism?

Dzur: We have begun to see a drift towards a more democratic understanding of professionalism among academics. Harry Boyte and others have discovered a deep dissatisfaction among even the most successful academics about their work and culture, a felt loss of agency. On one side are trustees and presidents and provosts demanding more accountability to the public in the forms of teaching for real-world skills and grant-funded research. On the other side are social capitalists demanding a different kind of public accountability through more service learning and scholarship of engagement. Both forms of public pressure are experienced as confining to many faculty, especially when applied crudely in the process of promotion and tenure. Democratic professionalism offers an alternative understanding of public accountability more congruent with traditional conceptions of the university as a cooperative community of knowledge seekers. Collaborating with lay people and allowing professional practices to be open to critical reflection from outsiders—a kind of “in-reach,” as opposed to conventional academic outreach programming—are ways of narrowing the social distance between campuses and the wider communities they depend upon for students and for funding.

Brown: If “local knowledge” is important, why are many professionals ignorant of its importance or resistant to seeking it out? Do you think this is primarily driven by economic self-interest? That is, professionals have to make a living so why include those without their training and credentials?

Dzur: Your question is about the interests that keep professionals at arm’s length from lay people. Sociologists of the professions describe a highly competitive jockeying for position between overlapping occupations: paralegals vs. lawyers, EMTs vs. MDs vs. RNs, psychiatrists vs. psychologists. An image of commanding competence in a specialized technique and body of knowledge is important in distinguishing your trade and this explains why professionals frequently obfuscate similarities and exaggerate differences from everyday knowledge. A first-year law student once told me that he wanted to be a lawyer because he liked the idea of wearing a suit to work. Seemingly superficial, to be sure, but it speaks to a deep need we have to be respected, be distinguished in some way.

Some of the most competent professionals I have encountered, however, are also the most open to local knowledge. Like Socrates, they understand the limits of their knowledge, how circumscribed their awareness is, and, in fact, how the skills and techniques they learned in graduate and professional school can sometimes hinder as well as help. Knowing their limits plus having confidence in themselves leads to the willingness to share responsibility for a task with a lay person.

The relationship between professional and local knowledge is complicated. In the book,¹⁵ I talk about the importance of both collaboration and contestation, meaning that there is solid middle ground for professionals to occupy between being dismissive and being deferential to lay people. Democratic professionals welcome and encourage intermediary spaces—real, concrete places for regular meetings—where those with professional and those with local knowledge can test, learn from, and also dispute each other.

Brown: Please say more about, what you call, “the intermediary realm” where professionals “possess the power to distract, encourage, limit, and inform democratic deliberation.”

Dzur: As an example of something that exists in this intermediary realm, consider the ethics committees mandated for hospitals and clinics as part of

¹⁵ Albert W. Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

their accreditation process. These reflect the general interest organizations have for dialogue, communication, transparency, and a sharing of responsibility for difficult decisions. One explicit goal for these committees is to educate hospital staff and the broader community on norms of humane health care that recognize patients as full-fledged participants in their own treatment even while they are in an organization that moves at an extremely rapid pace and follows complex rules. Such committees have the potential to be public forums—open spaces for reflective moral dialogue that will foster community conversations about tricky issues, such as organ donation, genetic testing, and physician-assisted suicide. Unfortunately, they are typically dominated by insiders and regulars from the medical staff who have particular interests in shielding their organization's practices from critical scrutiny. I serve on one of these committees and was struck recently by a story a senior staff member told about an area hospital that prided itself on having only one documented medical mistake and that it had been quickly corrected without any harm to the patient. Either that was the best hospital on Earth, or, more likely, it was one where medical mistakes were defined extremely narrowly, not reported, not investigated, or some combination of these factors. So professionals can encourage the kind of free-wheeling, open, and brutally honest public dialogue their organizations need to root out problems and serve people better, or they can do what is more comfortable—but much less useful to their organization in the long run.

Brown: What are some of the social problems that are amenable to the practice of democratic professionalism?

Dzur: Each of the cases of democratic professionalism I write about in the book connect up to social problems policy people call “wicked” because they are immune to simple solutions. The criminal justice system, the medical establishment, and the news business are all in crisis and nobody knows this better than practitioners themselves. They realize that improving their relationship with the public is critical to breaking out of wicked cycles that are ruining their profession and gaining them little ground. One out of every hundred American adults are in jail or prison as a result of “get tough” policies that criminal justice professionals know are short-sighted, if

only because the public really does not want to fund more prison construction. Affordable and accessible health care eludes us even as doctors spend less time with more patients for less compensation. Political journalism has turned to infotainment because that sells, but it has also contributed to an increasingly cynical culture that doesn't ultimately want to buy anything the so-called mainstream media (MSM) has to sell. By bringing lay people into professional domains, familiarizing them with some of the imperfections and gray areas in decision making by sharing tasks, the reformers I am interested in create public relationships that are needed to begin to work through these wicked problems.

Brown: John Dewey claimed the public's “most urgent problem” is “to find and identify itself.” Do democratic professionals think this to be important?

Dzur: Democratic professionals realize that helping publics find themselves is an urgent problem for both citizens and professionals. Organizations as different as hospitals, institutions of criminal justice, universities have similar self-images: at some level they serve the public. But how to understand this relationship between professionals in complex organizations and the people who are served? On one traditional account, the profession serves the public on its own terms: the court professionals know what justice is, the medical professionals know what health is, the journalists know what news is. Professionals are “social trustees” who earn a significant degree of work autonomy and independence in the establishment of performance standards by contributing their specialized skills and knowledge for the good of the larger society. But they also play a dominant role in defining what that good is.

Since the 1960s, public opinion regarding many professions has been increasingly skeptical as the social trustee image of doctors, lawyers, academics, and others has been tarnished by what appears to be a rise in self-seeking behavior on the part of practitioners. College administrators, for example, feeling the pressure of governing boards who share the public's skepticism, have responded with market-oriented demands for real-world skills and job training for graduates. But a market-oriented professionalism, though it may seem to those outside the organization as an improvement over self-satisfied

social trustee attitudes, is repellant to many practitioners who sacrificed time and energy to specialized study or apprenticeship and who are passionate about their work not because it sells but because it has meaning and significance. Academic professionals cultivate critical thinking that reveals hard truths about society, they preserve old ideas, old images, old sounds, and they investigate the natural world not to produce tangible and marketable goods or services, but to create a better public life nonetheless.

Brown: And so democratic professionalism are a different breed?

Dzur: Democratic professionalism is a mode of steering organizations towards the long-term and open-ended interests of the public that is responsive to contributions of both professionals and lay people. It is a new way of expressing a very old idea, or, put differently, an attempt at naming some practices we hardly even notice because we take them for granted. Consider the jury trial, for example. Jurors literally cocreate justice with court professionals by testing evidence, legal theories, and ultimately even the law of the land against everyday knowledge, practical experience, and widening moral awareness. Juries check the power of court professionals, but they also, as Tocqueville noticed long ago, increase the legitimacy of courts and therefore reinforce professional authority even as they share in the collaborative task of judgment.

So that wonderful comment of Dewey's from *The Public and Its Problems* is precisely on target. Democratic professionals recognize that healthy organizations, institutions, practices require active collaboration with real, not symbolic or imagined, publics. These publics help the professions find themselves.

Brown: Finally, could it be said that democratic professionalism is a different kind of "politics"?

Dzur: Max Weber closed his *Protestant Ethic* with the chilling description of the "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" trapped within the "iron cage of modernity." Democratic professionalism gives voice to reformers who recognize the vulnerability of complex organizations dominated by experts and managers who follow rational strategies and formal rules but have lost contact with the living values of an ongoing community,

what Weber called "substantive rationality." A reformer I interviewed about why citizen participation was important to the restorative justice program he had helped plan said he wanted to "build imperfection into the system." He meant that the administration of justice needs citizens on the inside of the organization to adequately do its job of fair and humane public safety. Even more strikingly, he meant by "imperfection" that he wanted citizens to play a serious role in his organization without turning into professionals themselves, repeat players jaundiced by seeing and judging what they think they have seen and judged a thousand times before. Citizen participation in his organization was a circulatory system that kept it alive to social reality. Justice, health and well-being, public information, education, these are objectives that modernity has delivered to complex organizations staffed by experts and professionals, headed up by managers, but they are inadequate to the tasks and have always been so because these objectives are only given meaning in ongoing concrete social interactions and relationships.

The answer to your question is "yes," this is a different kind of politics: participatory, responsible, collaborative. Democratic professionals share institutional power, share tasks and responsibility, and share experiences with lay citizens all in the hope of breaking free of the iron cage that separates modern organizations from the communities that give them purpose and meaning. University faculty, for example, can no longer rest on the laurels of a received professionalism but must reframe what it means to be an academic by more fully incorporating the public—not just fee-paying students and parents, and not just trustees—into bearing responsibility for ongoing communities of learning and scholarship. This is a politics of imperfection and will be messy, time-consuming, and open-ended; everything democratic, everything with heart and spirit always is!