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## The Ethical and Professional Risks of Engaged Scholarship

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**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY**

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**THE ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL RISKS  
OF ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP**

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KATHLEEN F. MCCONNELL

*Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts & Educational Alternatives.* Edited by Stephen John Hartnett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011; pp x + 291. \$80.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

*Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civic Engagement.* By Scott J. Peters with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schartzbach. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010; pp xx + 396. \$44.95 paper.

*The Ethics and Politics of Speech: Communication and Rhetoric in the Twentieth Century.* By Pat J. Gehrke. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009; pp x + 205. \$35.00 paper.

*Rhetorical Education in America.* Edited by Cheryl Glenn, Margaret M. Lyday, and Wendy B. Sharer. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004; pp xvi + 245. \$27.50 paper.

*Save the World on Your Own Time.* By Stanley Fish. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008; pp 208. \$19.95 cloth.

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In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a grant to the Global Perspective Institute (GPI) and the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) to develop a national action plan for promoting civic learning and democratic engagement in higher education. Among the initial findings of that joint study is that most civic engagement performed by students comes in the form of what Ashley Finley characterizes as apolitical service-learning projects that prompt students to reflect “inward on their individual experience, rather than outward to the relevance of that experience to a societal big picture.”<sup>1</sup> In response to these findings the GPI and the AAC&U recommend curricula that “more intentionally frame civic participation as politically and democratically centered.”<sup>2</sup>

The GPI-AAC&U study is noteworthy in that it advocates a place for politics in higher education, a controversial position due to popular perceptions of academia as an arcane, over-priced haven of leftist thought. Even those who will applaud the study may greet it with some apprehension if it does not also offer ideas for how to realize these recommendations without attracting further criticism of the academy and of politically engaged academics. If students incline toward service learning rather than political action, it may be because faculty are unsure of how to facilitate that action without, for instance, drawing the charge that we are indoctrinating students and advancing partisan agendas. For us to instruct students in civic engagement and promote political participation will require some additional thought about how we ourselves might practice engaged forms of scholarship.

The need for further guidance on this question makes timely the *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* special issue on rhetoric and public policy (2010) and the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* forum on engaged scholarship (2010), both of which invite us to reflect anew on the relationship between the terms “political,” “rhetorical,” and “engaged.” Both the *R&PA* special issue and the *QJS* forum anticipate the findings of the GPI-AAC&U study by taking up the question of how rhetorical scholars might better articulate their work with nonscholarly affairs.

The idea of engaged scholarship is not a new one, of course. It has roots in the mission of the American land grant university system established by the Morrill Acts (1862 and 1890) and institutionalized by the Hatch (1887) and Smith-Lever Acts (1914), which mandated creation of scholarly activities—all of an agricultural nature—designed to serve surrounding communities. Rhetoric and communication scholars have two additional traditions that inform

our understanding of engaged scholarship. The first is the civic education that shaped the early years of our discipline and continues in many forms today, and the second is a theoretical interest in acknowledging the political dimensions of all scholarship.

Joshua Gunn and John Louis Lucaites cite all three traditions as precedents for our present-day conversation, but they ground the *QJS* forum in this last, theoretical tradition. Invoking Immanuel Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, Gunn and Lucaites frame the idea of engaged scholarship as first and foremost a political question.<sup>3</sup> Calls for politically engaged teaching and scholarship such as those issued by GPI and AAC&U charge us with the task, they argue, of working out the relationship between the academic and the political.

The five books reviewed here—two single-authored texts, two anthologies, and one collection of interviews—suggest a different frame for our conversation. Though not all five projects speak to engaged scholarship or civic education per se, each gives reason for why greater consideration of ethics and professionalism—rather than a focus on the political—might be a more productive way of working out the problems and questions associated with engagement. Where Gunn and Lucaites treat ethical and professional matters as registers of the political, these projects instead figure the questions that we associate with engaged scholarship as first and foremost ethical and professional concerns. This framing of engaged scholarship promises to shift the conversation away from the task of defining the political toward questions about the professional composition and ethical character of academic research and higher education.

What is the thread that connects Pat J. Gehrke's history of speech communication, Stanley Fish's polemic on academic activism, Stephen John Hartnett's anthology on the prison-industrial complex, Scott J. Peters's collection of interviews with faculty members from Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and Cheryl Glenn, Margaret M. Lyday, and Wendy B. Sharer's anthology on rhetorical education? Each project offers a commentary on higher education that suggests that the primary question we face is not the place of the political within academia, but how to account for and navigate the ethical and professional implications of engaged research and teaching. The political plays a prominent role in each project reviewed here. Nevertheless, it is in the ethical insights they yield and professional considerations they raise that these five books make their most important contributions to our conversation on how to make significant and relevant academic work.

## THE ETHICS OF ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Gehrke's *The Ethics and Politics of Speech* maps the ways in which twentieth-century communication scholars have articulated ethical and political concerns with their professional responsibilities and taken up ethical and political questions in their research. His stated aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of the field, but to contribute a history that "unsettle[s] our memory" of "how rhetoric relates to ethics and politics" (*Ethics*, 166). Rather than treating communication ethics as a subgenre of communication studies, Gehrke identifies inquiries, across all types of communication research and as far back as the field's inaugural journals, into how a person ought to speak and why they should do so, the sorts of communication practices we as teachers ought to promote, and the types of research we ought to engage in. The result is a fresh perspective on what will be for the readers of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* a familiar history. It succeeds in both illuminating myriad ways in which communication scholars articulated their work to the political and cues us to see ethical inquiry as always having been an integral part of communication research.

By Gehrke's telling, twentieth-century communication scholars engaged the political in a variety of ways that were informed, he suggests, by a rich discussion of ethics. To show the discipline's interest in ethics and politics, Gehrke does not perform an exegesis that uncovers political and ethical propositions where we might not expect to find them. Rather, he selects journal articles from each decade that expressly took up ethical and political questions. His arrangement of those articles shows ethics and politics to be central to twentieth-century communication research. In the last century, scholars treated the political as a field of application, a professional responsibility, an epistemological condition, a philosophical inquiry, and what Gehrke calls a "legitimizing authority" (*Ethics*, 111). Likewise, scholars advanced a range of ethical practices designed to align good speech with good character (both broadly conceived). Those practices included mental health adjustments, advocacy for democratic practice, the practice of reason, the practice of dialogism, and incorporating judgments into our acts of criticism.

In the early years of speech communication, speech psychologists and mental hygienists were occupied with ethical questions. For these early scholars, the ethics of speech was a matter of mental health. Speakers' relationship to themselves was of primary concern, whereas the political was a field of

application. Scholars believed the purpose of good speech to be personality development and social adjustment at the level of the individual. Both this pedagogical program and the discussion movement that followed deemphasized eloquence and platform oratory in favor of promoting efficient and sound everyday speech habits, which could be realized by calibrating one's self to social norms. As one type of speech, political discourse could benefit, they thought, from both mental hygiene techniques and, later, discussion models of communication.

Where hygienists saw their job as facilitating political and other types of speech, discussion advocates of the 1930s and '40s believed that it was "an essential function of all education, and most certainly of speech education to train students in proper democratic participation" (*Ethics*, 43). Here, speech professors saw the political as their professional responsibility. To meet this responsibility meant promoting democracy over other political models such as anarchy and fascism, and promoting deliberative discussion over other models of speech such as propaganda. During this time, the ethics of good speech aligned with a specific political ideology to the degree that during the world wars, speech teachers thought it the logical progression of their responsibilities to contribute to the war effort.

This overt political engagement led eventually to a rupture in the discipline as the nationalistic emphasis of speech education came under scrutiny. It is here that communication scholars first began to see the political as a dimension of communication research itself. Some scholars renewed their commitments to social scientific methods in hopes of identifying a communication ethics that could serve as a standard against which to judge "good speech." These scholars believed that reasoned speech was the only way to produce good, sound speech acts.

At the same time, their contemporaries trained in the rhetorical tradition registered dissatisfaction with scientific and statistical methods and turned in search of alternatives toward philosophical inquiry. Eager to further distance themselves from the narrow program of speech pedagogy by elevating and growing rhetoric's domain, rhetorical scholars developed arguments that staked out a central position for rhetoric not only in human *affairs* but also in human *being*. The political is not absent from this literature but is more an abstraction within the philosophies and theories of rhetoric that proliferated. In contrast, ethics took on a distinct form in the practice of dialogue defined as the bridging of Self and Other.

In the last third of the century the political again took a specific form,

and scholars once again spoke of it as a professional responsibility. Beginning in the 1970s, Gehrke explains, it served as “a legitimating authority” (*Ethics*, 111). As Gehrke tells the story, scholars did not argue over whether their work was political. Rather, the disputes of the time turned on ethical questions of how best to realize political aims and where to ground one’s political judgments: in the moral imperatives that hailed from the empirically verifiable world, or in our subjective and socially bound value systems? This was the crux of the arguments over objectivity and relativism. “What was at stake in these arguments,” Gehrke writes, “was the question of whose work would be considered politically relevant” (127).

With a focus on the ethical as well as the political, Gehrke’s history brings us to our present discussion on engaged scholarship by a slightly different route than that taken by Gunn and Lucaites. Gehrke has compiled a history of our discipline’s treatment of ethics in the last century because he wants us to see our history as a resource for issues and questions we face in the present (*Ethics*, 5). “This literature,” he writes, “yields fruitful insights . . . into what openings might already be present in the history of the discipline for thinking about ethics” (7). In illuminating those resources Gehrke also shows that giving ethics a central place in rhetoric and communication studies means more than determining standards of right and wrong. Rather, the scholarship on ethics that Gehrke reviews proposes ethical inquiry as a mode of critical practice.

*The Ethics and Politics of Speech* does not promise to unearth from the past better ethical programs, but it does provide a disciplinary context within which to evaluate our current ethical commitments. For instance, it adds to the questions Gunn and Lucaites pose—Should we engage? What do we engage? Whom do we engage?—the question of how: How do we know ourselves to be engaged scholars? In many ways, our current discussion answers that question with a turn toward the political. That is to say, we understand “being engaged” to mean making visible our politics—making them visible to our students, to the communities in which we work, to the taxpayers and donors who fund our universities, and to each other in our tenure and promotion processes.

Visible politics is the subject of the epigraph that opens the *QJS* forum. The quote is from a speech given by Charles E. Morris III at the protest held outside the National Communication Association’s 2008 annual convention. Invoking Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected to city office, Morris tells his audience: “you have to be out about your politics.”<sup>4</sup> Morris’s

statement shows engaged scholarship to be as much an ethical matter as a political one. Its purchase derives from the way it directs our gaze toward the political (your politics) while making an ethical claim (how you should be in relation to your politics).

Gehrke's history prompts us to evaluate the ethical programs, such as Morris's that we currently promote. It prompts us to look back at the blind spots and hubris of earlier generations as a way of reflecting on the ethical imperatives that underwrite our scholarship in the present day. That historical perspective enables us, for instance, to take a critical look at our "ethical problematization" of *not* being out about our politics and the ways in which we define and regulate visibility.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, Gehrke's history models a critical ethical reflection that does not devolve into mere debunking but is generative and productive.

### PROFESSIONALISM AS AN ETHIC

By way of a history of our discipline, Gehrke offers an alternative to the polarizing effects of the political/apolitical debate that surrounds the practice of engaged scholarship. So, too, in his own way, does Stanley Fish. Polemical in tone, *Save the World on Your Own Time* is best read as the latest installment in an argument that Fish has been working out since the 1980s. His argument, in short, is that when acting in our professional capacity as academics, we should refrain from voicing our political views "or any other kinds of views except academic views" (*Save*, 19). His rationale is that institutions of higher education have a specific job, and they should do their job and not try to do someone else's. In many ways *Save the World* is a restatement of the critique of antiprofessionalism that Fish offered in *Doing What Comes Naturally* (1989).<sup>6</sup> Your first impulse, in fact, may be to characterize *Save the World* as a watered down version of a once-sharp attack on conservative and leftist critics who sought, each for their own reasons, to diminish the cultural upheaval then underway in literary studies. Fish argued then that the rhetorical nature of institutions makes meaningless the charge that academia (and specifically literary criticism) is vacuous and that our research is undertaken merely to satisfy internal professional requirements peculiar to the university.<sup>7</sup> Yes indeed, Fish argued, in much the same way that historically bound laws and not a higher sense of moral purpose govern our legal institutions, the university lives by a professional code evolved from the practices and considerations



peculiar to institutions of higher education. Fish refers to this as the rhetorical dimension of the institution. Because of its rhetorical nature, he goes on, there are only two ways to take a stand against academia's current culture of professionalism: we can either advance essentialist arguments, or else we can ask ourselves the ethical question, what kind of professional life do we wish to live (*Doing*, 221)? The rhetoricity of the university, he points out, means that those things that we dislike about it are not inherent to it but rather constructions that can, with some effort, be remade. His final comments on academic professionalism are worth quoting:

If there is anything like a “crisis in English studies,” it is a crisis in confidence, and it is one that we have in part created by taking ourselves too seriously as a priesthood of a culture already made, and not seriously enough as professionals whose business it is to make and remake that culture, even as we celebrate it. (*Doing*, 214)

Read as an extension of the above, the directive Fish issues twenty years later to “do your job” seems more a call to arms than an order to get back to work. For many readers, though, *Save the World* will register as the latter. What has changed?

For one, the exigencies are different. *Doing What Comes Naturally* was in response to criticisms issuing mostly from within the university—traditionalists alarmed by feminism and postcolonial influences who wished to restore the mores of a former time and leftists who wished their discipline to become more politicized. In contrast, *Save the World* is a response to concerns about academic freedom issuing from outside the university and to the ways in which legislators and others have leveraged those concerns to justify budget cuts and smear campaigns on individual scholars whose work offends them. Fish is no longer mounting a defense of one discipline, but of higher education itself. And it is a defense. What has not changed from then to now is Fish's unshakable commitment to institutions of higher learning.

For another, it seems at first glance that the key term in *Save the World* is not “professional” but “political.” Fish's basic argument then and now is the same: if there are problems with some other institution that you wish to see changed, you should go work in *that* institution. Only this time, it seems, he frames the issue less as a matter of professionalism than as an echo of the question Kant first posed about politics' domain. But Fish's is not a philosophical argument.

The emphasis on politics notwithstanding, *Save the World* remains first and foremost an argument about professionalism as both a rhetorical strategy and an ethical stance. Given his earlier argument that we should make universities as we wish them to be, it admittedly seems inconsistent to take universities to task, as Fish does, for writing civic education, multiculturalism, and social justice into their mission statements (*Save*, 10–12). Is not such a practice a way to realize the kinds of professional lives we wish to live?<sup>8</sup> Concerned by attacks on the enterprise of higher education (that is to say, on practices Fish believes are appropriate to institutions of higher education like the generating and teaching of new knowledge), Fish proposes that we instead engage in rhetorical strategy. Frame your work, he suggests, as concerned not with justice (the responsibility of legal institutions) or faith (the responsibility of religious institutions) or politics (the responsibility of governmental institutions) but as academic inquiry—our professional duty—and it will be apparent to even the most ardent of critics that we are simply doing our jobs, jobs that contribute something provided by no other institution. The enthymeme to his syllogism: institutions that contribute in ways wholly unique from other institutions and in line with clearly delineated professional responsibilities are fundable (*Save*, 100–4).

Fish's rhetorical strategizing, though perhaps practical, falls short of compelling. The more productive parts of *Save the World* are those in which he presents professionalism as an ethic—a way of establishing and maintaining the institutional boundaries that give form to academic life. Fish describes what academics do as exploring problems, reflecting on and analyzing texts, producing accounts and descriptions, and posing questions to students that they would not have the experience to ask themselves (*Save*, 49–53). In each case, he is proposing that we know our academic selves through the institutional form those tasks acquire. That is to say, they can only take on meaning within the symbolic economy of the academy, and we can distinguish them only by their association with academic institutions. Our professional practices that organize and sustain that process of signification—publishing, promotion, granting of degrees, titles, and awards—are the very practices we often decry as petty and careerist in the most disparaging sense. On the contrary, Fish suggests, those practices are our lifeblood.

To be clear, Fish does not seem invested in any particular academic tradition so much as he is anxious that we be able to distinguish ourselves from the professional responsibilities (and agendas) of corporations, religious organizations, and state governing bodies. Here again the rhetoricity of the

university plays a key role in his argument. The professional activities in which we engage as academics, he argues, are no more or less substantive than those of any other institution. When, for instance, we advocate for engaged scholarship as a means of “making meaningful” academic research, we risk directing an antiprofessional sentiment at ourselves that diminishes our whole profession. We can see hints of that sentiment in the charge that academic work is “too theoretical,” academics “too concerned with quantity over quality,” academic research “too superficial” and “too self-absorbed.” When we level these charges at ourselves, Fish cautions, and advance engaged scholarship as a corrective to the superficialities of academic work, we cede ground to critics who would dispense with academia altogether.

### THE PROFESSIONAL IS POLITICAL

Fish encourages us to be cognizant of the ways in which advocacy for political engagement can take unexpected ethical turns that diminish academic enterprise. To make meaningful our work and hold ourselves accountable, he suggests that we critique our own institutions and professional practices. Stephen J. Hartnett’s anthology on the prison-industrial complex echoes Fish on this point. Contributors to the anthology argue that merely by maintaining the boundaries of the academy and determining who may access its educational resources, we contribute to a caste system made up of entitled, franchised, and law-abiding citizens and unentitled, disenfranchised criminals. One way we might be more engaged, they suggest, is to recognize the ways in which institutions of higher education benefit from this caste system.

*Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex (CPIC)* is a collection of analytic and informative essays, policy proposals, poetry, and artwork. The anthology itself is a collaborative effort among community organizers, scholars, and people who are incarcerated. The book is organized into two sections. The essays in the first section analyze police culture, drug and educational policies, and media representations of crime. The aim in each case is to show that prisons, though largely operating out of sight, are not isolated institutions that act independently. Rather, these essays argue that the prison-industrial complex depends on the successful workings of other institutions. It succeeds, in other words, when other institutions “do their job,” as Fish might say. The second half of the book details projects that attempt to intervene in prison culture by operating on the inside, or else that seek to mitigate the isolating

and dehumanizing effects of prison by building ties between people serving time in prisons and communities living on the outside. A few of the projects showcased are the Prison Creative Arts Project, the Sisters Within Theater Troupe, Each One Reach One (a playwriting program for incarcerated youth), and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, which facilitates dialogue between incarcerated and nonincarcerated people.

On one level, the collection offers to the conversation on engaged scholarship specific case studies that showcase a range of scholarly engagement in action. On another, it offers an alternative frame for the conversation by showing prison activism to be as much a professional concern for academics as it is a political matter.

The primary way that *CPIC* frames engaged scholarship as a professional concern is by showing the articulations that exist between penal and educational institutions. A number of the essays in the collection discuss the relationship between prisons and universities, and what Erica Meiners characterizes as “patterns of institution building” that reinforce the dehumanization of some for the sake of empowering others (*CPIC*, 19). Meiners and other contributors suggest that in doing our academic jobs—jobs like raising admissions standards and placing restrictions on financial aid benefits—our work contributes to what Hartnett calls a “punishing democracy” (*CPIC*, 10). These essays raise ethical questions about the academic gate-keeping that is a routine matter at most universities and colleges. They also issue a challenge to the professional sovereignty we as scholars assume that allows us to choose the kinds of issues we will engage and the ways we will engage them. It hails the very readers who might pass over the anthology because they “do not work on” prison issues. Its contributors suggest that on the contrary, merely by executing our academic responsibilities, we all work on prisons. Garrett A. Duncan puts it this way: “the schools-to-prisons pipeline is largely the *unintended* result of contemporary educational policies and practices, including those produced by people with good intentions” (*CPIC*, 203). Finally, they suggest that if we take a critical look our academic cultures *in addition* to intervening in other institutions, we may find that we need to alter institutions of higher education in ways that go beyond modifying service-learning programs and promotion processes. Meiners sums it up like this: “If we take decarceration movements seriously, how must our allegiances and relationships to our universities and colleges change” (*CPIC*, 20)?

A second way in which *CPIC* frames scholarly engagement as a professional matter is by reinforcing Fish’s point about the importance to education of

institutional form. The stories about educational and artistic projects taking place inside prisons are startling in the pedagogical insights they yield. These stories drive home Fish's point about the importance of institutional context—that education derives its significance from the institutional forms that it takes. One story illustrates this especially well. Because of a legislative technicality only recently corrected, teenagers who served time in California's juvenile court schools were required to attend classes six hours a day—but could not earn a high school diploma. Robin Sohnen, who relays the story, recounts that the youth “perceived the situation as a cruel joke” and, subsequently, did not take their classes seriously (*CPIC*, 194). Those students would likely understand what Fish means when he says that, far from being superficial, the professional codes and practices that govern schools are what infuse education with its significance.

In addition to the professional considerations it raises, the anthology also raises questions about our ethical modes of engaged scholarship. One of the punishing dimensions of penal institutions is the degree to which they demand that the incarcerated engage in self-reflection. Many of the educational programs detailed in *CPIC*, too, ask incarcerated students to demonstrate self-awareness, self-expression, and self-commitment, and make those practices visible to us the readers as evidence of students' rehabilitation and potential. These ethical modes that we impose on others in the interest of making visible our own scholarly engagement might serve as a cautionary tale about the regulatory dimensions of engaged scholarship. Here again is a place where critical ethical inquiry informed by our disciplinary history might be useful to our conversation on engaged scholarship.

## A REVIVAL OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, PART 1

Hartnett's anthology showcases a range of academic-community collaboration. Scott Peters's *Democracy and Higher Education (DHE)*, too, offers case studies of academic-community collaboration though of a different kind. In *DHE*, Peters profiles 12 faculty members affiliated with Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (one of Cornell's four statutory colleges that receive funding from SUNY). All of the subjects were selected for their off-campus collaborations with community partnerships. The aim of Peters's project is to highlight engaged scholarship taking place within disciplines other than the humanities and social sciences, to provide examples of civic

engagement “that do not necessarily have anything to do with undergraduate education,” and to give reason to revive the original mission of the land grant university (*DHE*, 9). Peters organized the project with the express intent of making the case for the public purpose of higher education. His frame for the project is Harry S. Truman’s 1946 Commission on Higher Education, which charged U.S. colleges and universities with “a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living” (*DHE*, 4).

Even for a project that aims to revive an older ideal of civic engagement grounded in the mission of the land grant university, the literature in which Peters chooses to situate his project seems unnecessarily dated. The civic revival that Peters has undertaken is inspiring, and it could benefit from the theoretical and methodological insights that have come out of rhetoric and communication scholarship since the 1940s. *DHE* is an excellent complement, for this reason, to Gehrke. Peters provides some of the institutional context for the history that Gehrke writes, and Gehrke provides a more nuanced account of the theoretical debates that have influenced the four traditions of scholarly engagement that Peters uses to frame his project (*DHE*, 52–62).

Although the theoretical basis for Peters’s project is undeveloped, the practitioner profiles are valuable case studies of engaged scholarship. The product of narrative inquiry, the practitioner profiles come in the form of extensive autobiographies that detail the narrators’ personal and professional lives (*DHE*, 66). For the faculty profiled, the politics of engaged scholarship is of less concern than the professional considerations that arise, including how to account for academic-community collaboration in tenure and promotion processes. In some cases, scholars were given contractual mandates to work with community partnerships. Even so, the university and departmental cultures were such that faculty had to devise creative ways to sustain and evaluate their work through the traditional channels of academia. In the case of Molly Jahn, a plant geneticist and founder of the Public Seed Initiative, her publications in *Science* and *Nature* resulted from her collaboration with farmers “because [she was] encountering interesting biology in uncommon places” (*DHE*, 94).

While seeking recognition for their work within academia, subjects also feel pressure to prove themselves relevant to nonacademic communities, an unexpected problem perhaps for those working in “applied” fields. Tom Maloney, who spends the bulk of his time conducting training in agricultural human resource management, reports that even he feels the need to justify his work: “People are asking why we need people like me—professionals who

are funded by their tax dollars—to address . . . issues . . . addressed better or cheaper by private consultants” (*DHE*, 288). These professional anxieties suggest that whereas engaged scholarship may solve some problems, it also promises to generate others.

In addition to raising interesting practical and professional considerations about engaged scholarship, these profiles offer a counterargument to Fish. The university-community collaborations they showcase challenge Fish’s characterization of engaged scholarship as a zero-sum game. All of the subjects argue that their collaborative work falls squarely within their professional responsibilities as academics, even by Fish’s narrow definition. Quite simply, faculty would not be able to meet the directive to generate novel forms of knowledge were they not collaborating with community partners. In answer then to the question, “How do we know ourselves to be engaged scholars?,” the subjects profiled in *DHE* reply that they know when their work yields knowledge of value to both their community partners and their academic communities. Even as they express many of the antiprofessional sentiments Fish warns us about, the scholars profiled in *DHE* see engagement less as a corrective to the superficialities of academic work than as a necessary dimension of the kind of scholarship they wish to do.

## A REVIVAL OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, PART 2

*Democracy and Higher Education* is a worthwhile read because of the level of detail it provides about university-community collaborations. The value of that detail is made salient by a lack of specifics in *Rhetorical Education in America* (*REA*). Cheryl Glenn, Margaret M. Lyday, and Wendy B. Share’s edited volume compiles a very different set of arguments in favor of civic education. As Gunn and Lucaites note, the civic tradition remains an open chapter in rhetorical studies. *REA* proves it equally so in our sister discipline, rhetoric and composition studies. It is the only book reviewed here that articulates the idea of engaged scholarship with undergraduate education, and the link, its contributors argue, is rhetoric. In her introduction, Cheryl Glenn writes: “rhetorical education enables people to engage in and change American society” (*REA*, viii). In considering how to make that happen, the collection’s contributors respond to two exigencies: the increased demand for relevant post-secondary education and the changing demographics of student populations.

As interesting as its insights are into rhetorical education, the greater value of *REA* may be the glimpse it offers into our professional psyche. When read alongside Peters's *Democracy and Higher Education*, *REA* makes evident the fact that we in rhetorical studies face different professional constraints and institutional directives than do our counterparts in the agricultural and life sciences. This suggests that we cannot speak about the place of politics within the academy as though each discipline's relationship to the political (or, for that matter, to research, teaching, and service) were the same. This has important consequences for how engaged scholarship unfolds across the university campus. Those professional differences necessitate that we configure engaged *rhetorical* study in ways that align with the disciplinary identity we wish to cultivate.

*REA* is valuable for what it tells us about that disciplinary identity. For instance, read alongside Peters's practitioner profiles and—for example—the hostile publics, professional setbacks, entrenched public officials, and compromising industry luncheons that make up the world of golf turf maintenance, rhetorical education seems a remarkably well-manicured affair. That is to say, in contrast to the messy deliberative processes that continually threaten to sink the research agendas of the science faculty that Peters profiles, *Rhetorical Education in America* reads, to borrow a phrase from Willard Waller, like a “museum of virtue.”<sup>9</sup> With its many references to key disciplinary concepts such as participation, invention, and critical literacy, *REA* offers a lofty vision of civic engagement. What can account for this disciplinary contrast?

There is more than a disconnect between theory and practice at work in *REA*. It seems, rather, that in our efforts to enact rhetorical education, we are meeting with the walls of our own disciplinary traditions and what Robert Asen characterizes as our disciplinary aversion to method.<sup>10</sup> Asen attributes that aversion in part to concern that rhetorical study not become too formulaic. It may also arise from a fear that any political messiness that might result from civic engagement—if associated with rhetoric's controversial qualities (that is to say, its potential for deception and manipulation)—will reflect poorly on the study of rhetoric. Such an association could make it difficult for rhetorical scholars to do the kind of community collaboration detailed in Peters's study. This may be why contributors to *REA* speak about rhetoric almost exclusively as a positive force for change that generates identification and connection across differences.

The impulse to present rhetoric in the best possible light may tell us more about our professional anxieties than it does about the potential of rhetorical



education. There are long institutional histories that account for why a school of agriculture seems the vanguard of political engagement and rhetorical education lofty and eloquent. Even more so than speech communication, rhetoric and composition has labored in the shadow of literary criticism. The professional identity of literary criticism, recall, is premised on an old distinction between the leisure and manufacturing classes. Thomas P. Miller's essay "Lest We Go the Way of the Classics" underscores this point. English composition and public speaking, Miller explains, could be farmed out to the high school and speech teachers because those subjects fell under the category of "the work of making things" (*REA*, 24). Those same professional hierarchies inform our present moment, where we face renewed pressure to make relevant the education we offer even as we maintain a scholarly posture. Miller believes that the academic distinction among research, teaching, and service is "losing its authority," and he suggests "the challenge for those seeking to make universities into institutions of public learning is to exploit the broader instabilities in institutional hierarchies that have raised these professional anxieties" (*REA*, 31). One idea, he proposes, is to give greater weight to a scholarly profile that values public service, particularly where it articulates with teaching. The general character of *Rhetorical Education in America*—a collection of essays about rhetorical pedagogy that serves primarily to showcase rhetorical scholarship—suggests any such reorganization will be difficult to realize and perhaps for good reason. This is a risky professional proposition for rhetorical scholars with ties to composition and speech communication if only because it suggests "demoting" in some sense the research side of our discipline that, as Gehrke reminds us, took many decades to establish as credible and worthwhile.

### **MAKING OUR SCHOLARSHIP SIGNIFICANT AND RELEVANT**

Social engagement, civic engagement, engaged scholarship, rhetorical education—these terms are not synonymous, but in their current usage all point to practices that seek to bridge academic and nonacademic communities. We often distinguish these practices by their relationship to the political. Socially engaged scholarship can be a euphemism for social justice work or direct intervention into inequitable and exploitative systems. Civic engagement, in contrast, can seem politically neutral and often refers not to a particular

kind of political action but to any activity in the interest of the general public, which is to say not private or corporate enterprise. As Gehrke's history reminds us, the study of rhetoric has long and complicated associations with both social and civic engagement, and when scholars of rhetoric take up the question of how to be engaged our answers are responsive to those traditions. It may be because of the different trajectories and inclinations of social and civic engagement that our first impulse is to clarify whether by "engaged" we mean service toward a particular political end or participation in public deliberation. In other words, it may be because of those traditions that the most important question always seems to be what we mean by "political."

In my review of Gehrke, Fish, Peters, and the anthologies edited by Hartnett and Glenn and colleagues, I have brought to the foreground the ethical and professional questions each raises about engaged scholarship. My aim in doing so has been to give reason to frame the topic of engaged scholarship as other than a question of the political. The meaning of "political" is by no means self-evident or stable, and it is for good reason that we attend to it. One option, though, is to approach that question as an ethical inquiry rather than a philosophical one. Doing so would dispose us to attend to our reasons for designating some scholarship as disengaged, apolitical, or politically irrelevant.

Engaged scholarship holds the potential, it seems, to settle the question of relevance that plagues higher education. The possibility of producing scholarship that contributes to the social affairs going on around us is a compelling one, as is the prospect of being able to point with some degree of accuracy to the effects of our teaching. It would allow us to prove our scholarship politically nuanced and thus dispel the stereotype of academics as knee-jerk liberals. Those of us who teach and study rhetoric hope it might generate interest in our work and a more inspired role for rhetoric in our everyday affairs. There are, however, a host of professional and ethical considerations that promise to complicate these benefits.

One consideration for scholars of rhetoric is the professional risk we take in once again advancing the study of rhetoric as primarily a pedagogical practice—by some accounts the most expedient way of realizing an engaged form of scholarship. A second consideration for scholars of rhetoric is the professional constraint imposed by the popular association between rhetoric and disingenuous politics. This association may make it challenging for us to realize the kind of community collaboration that Peters hopes to inspire. There are, too, less discipline-specific professional considerations. Engaged scholarship need not mean extending ourselves "outward" beyond the walls

of the academy, but could instead come in the form of critical reflection on how we administer higher education and how that work articulates to other institutions such as prisons.

At the center of these considerations is the question of how we wish to position our institutions and our professional selves in relation to others. This is both a professional question and an ethical one. One of the most valuable insights we have from the ethical inquiries undertaken by scholars of rhetoric is that the answer will be rhetorical—in the best possible sense. When we characterize academic culture as superficial and the distinctions we maintain between it and other social spheres as artificial, we should ask ourselves whether in doing so we disparage and diminish the constitutive power of academic work. Rather than think of engaged scholarship as something we must begin to do as a way to “make substantive” academic enterprise, we might instead treat the idea of engagement as a rhetorical exercise, an exercise on which we bring to bear the full weight of our expertise. Figuring ways to present academia as already relevant and significant may be the best way to realize an engaged form of scholarship.

## NOTES

1. Ashley Finley, “Civic Learning and Democratic Engagements: A Review of the Literature on Civic Engagement in Post-Secondary Education,” Paper prepared for the United States Department of Education as part of Contract: ED-OPE-10-C-0078 (May 24, 2011), 4.
2. Finley, “Civic Learning,” 4.
3. Joshua Gunn and John Louis Lucaites, “The Contest of Faculties: On Discerning the Politics of Social Engagement in the Academy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (2010): 405.
4. Gunn and Lucaites, “The Contest of Faculties,” 404.
5. Ronald Walter Greene and Darren Hicks, “Lost Convictions: Debating Both Sides and the Ethical Self-Fashioning of Liberal Citizens,” *Cultural Studies* 19 (2005): 100–26.
6. Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1989).
7. Fish critiques claims very similar to those made by John McGowan in his immodest proposal and by Anna M. Young, Adria Battaglia, and Dana L. Cloud in their essay about the ways in which academic culture polices activist scholars; John McGowan,

“An Immodest Proposal,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (2010): 413–20; Anna M. Young, Adria Battaglia, and Dana L. Cloud, “(Un)Disciplining the Scholar Activist: Policing the Boundaries of Political Engagement,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (2010): 427–35.

8. Phaedra C. Pezzullo speaks to this point in her discussion of the ethical codes that govern academic hiring such as “equal opportunity” policies; Phaedra C. Pezzullo, “Tripping over Boundary-Stones: Reflections on Engaged Scholarship,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (2010): 450–54.
9. Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1932), 34.
10. Robert Asen, “Introduction: Rhetoric and Public Policy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13 (2010): 2–3.

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