Our search for new resources for the AASCU institutions participating in the American Democracy Project (ADP) led us to John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley’s edited volume, “To Serve a Larger Purpose”: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education (2011, Temple University Press), a book that presents a compelling case for reframing our public work as democratic engagement. Saltmarsh and Hartley argue that U.S. institutions of higher education have largely failed to fulfill their democratic purposes. They champion a re-framing of and a re-commitment to higher education’s public purposes not as civic engagement, but as democratic engagement.

Echoing Ernest Boyer’s 1996 call for higher education to heed its civic mandate, Saltmarsh and Hartley argue that higher education has focused too narrowly on civic engagement efforts defined by activity and place. Just as Boyer urged colleges and universities to focus on “not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the Nation’s life” in order to foster a campus climate in which “academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and creatively with each other” (pp. 32-33), Saltmarsh and Hartley suggest “that institutions must redefine their public work as democratic engagement focused on purpose and process.

Colleges and universities with cultures of democratic engagement and education would be guided by values including inclusiveness, participation, task sharing and reciprocity in public problem solving,” as well as “an equality of respect for the knowledge and experience that everyone contributes to education and community building” (p. 10). Moving higher education from civic engagement to democratic engagement, the editors acknowledge, would require colleges and universities to undertake transformational change efforts designed to realign core institutional tenets and work with our democratic purposes. This edited volume, then, responds to Boyer’s call not only by drawing on his words for its title, but by calling on higher education to re-focus our intentions and recommit to the work of transforming our institutions—indeed the whole academy—in ways that more deeply embody our democratic purposes.

Saltmarsh and Hartley call on higher education to reorient our collective work from sporadic community engagement toward systematic efforts to address significant public problems. To do so, institutions must transform themselves and their understandings of community relationships; research and knowledge production; epistemology; outcomes; and the political dimensions of this work. The editors suggest that we must “not only strive to encourage civic impulses and actions among students,” but we must also take collective responsibility with our communities to confront problems and enact meaningful social change; we must align “the pursuit of knowledge with the pursuit of a healthier society and a stronger, more robust democracy” (p. 4).

Saltmarsh and Hartley introduce the book by tracing the civic engagement movement within U.S. higher education. In doing so, they highlight AASCU’s 2002 Stewards of Place monograph and the American Democracy Project as an examples of important models in this movement. The editors tackle conceptual understandings of civic engagement as well as institutional commitments to engagement. Contributing authors outline various challenges to engagement and focus the discussion on the campus level. They also outline specific ways in which to strategically reorient higher education institutions toward democratic engagement. In Chapter 1, Saltmarsh and Hartley detail their vision for democratic engagement in higher
education. In Chapter 2, Hartley charts the history of the civic engagement movement. In Chapters 3 through 12, contributing authors explore various components of democratic engagement and put forth a set of models and means with which to reorient higher education toward democratic engagement. Authors address topics ranging from society’s need for civic professionals, to the needs and interest of various campus stakeholders—students, faculty, chief academic officers and other leadership. Together, contributing authors sound the call for colleges and universities to collectively transform higher education through concrete and constructive means.

Several chapters of this book are written by ADP leaders and friends. William Plater, provost emeritus at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, authored a chapter on collective leadership for engagement, suggesting ways in which to align institutional structures toward the creation of a democratic culture. (AASCU’s Plater Award is named after William and honors chief academic officers who advance civic engagement.) Another ADP champion, former provost John Presley of Illinois State University, contributed a chapter on chief academic officers and community-engaged faculty work.

Saltmarsh and Hartley conclude the book with a set of six propositions intended to “spur the deep change in institutional priorities and values needed” (p. 292) to re-orient higher education toward democratic engagement:

1. Transformational change requires consensus about mission.
2. Democratically engaged institutions co-create educational experiences with their students.
3. Campus leadership must model democratic engagement and values.
4. Institutions must orient graduate education toward public purposes.
5. Knowledge generation occurs in a variety of ways.
6. Resources for faculty development oriented toward civic engagement are needed.

The editors and contributing authors of this book make a compelling case for reframing the public work of higher education toward democratic—rather than merely civic—engagement.

For nearly a decade, AASCU member campuses involved in the American Democracy Project have worked to embody democratic principles and to drive democratic education more deeply into the curriculum. This new addition to the literature of civic engagement offers both conceptual frameworks and specific suggestions to transform higher education and to ensure that our graduates are prepared to be informed, engaged citizens for our democracy.

Jennifer M. Domagal-Goldman is the program manager for AASCU’s American Democracy Project.

* Note: Royalties from this book fund the American Democracy Project’s John Saltmarsh Award for Emerging Leaders in Civic Engagement.