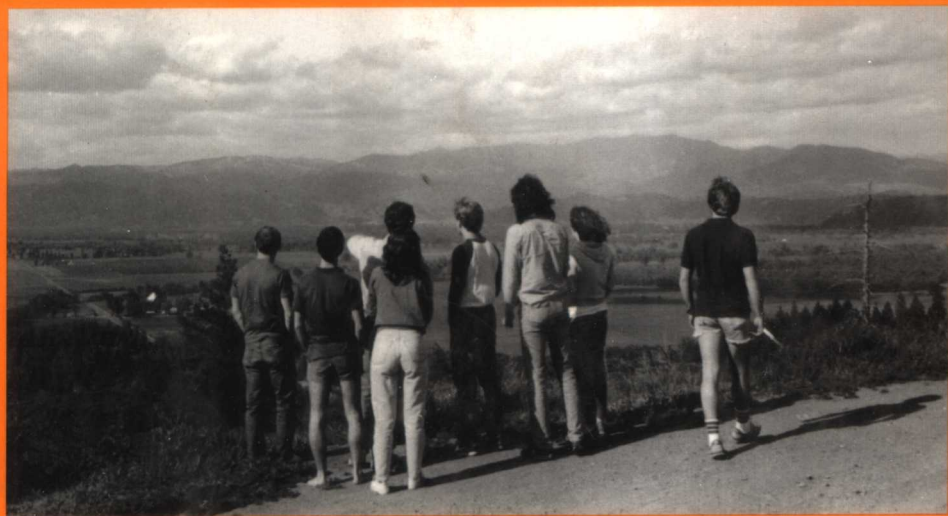


ESCAPE FROM THE IVORY TOWER



STUDENT ADVENTURES
IN DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENTIAL
EDUCATION

David H. Lempert

Escape from the Ivory Tower

**Student Adventures in
Democratic Experiential
Education**

David H. Lempert

**in association with
Xavier N. de Souza Briggs
and Contributors**

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Preface

This is a small book about a large vision.

It is a vision of American education and how the educational system can serve and create a healthier and more democratic society.

It is a vision of the potential relationship between educational institutions and citizens, as well as that between American institutions of all kinds and citizens of all interests and beliefs.

Former President Jimmy Carter, now a professor at Emory University in Atlanta, recently wondered aloud when university social science departments would draw on the communities surrounding them, study those communities, and contribute to solving their pressing social and economic problems.

Whereas a former president wondered, another president has started to act. In one of his first acts of office, President Bill Clinton created the Corporation for National and Community Service to challenge colleges and universities to renew their commitment to service.

These efforts may seem like small seedlings sprouting out from America's ivory towers—foreboding institutions under assault in an era of dwindling finances and diminishing public trust. But they represent part of a continuing recognition that changes are needed in this country's universities if the United States is to remain a vital and dynamic society and if other countries—many of them

following America's lead in education—will invigorate their own commitments to community, democracy, and development.

The vision this book shows is how to bring about these changes within the constraints of existing resources. It is a vision of unleashing the energies of students, teachers, and society to make learning an adventure and to set the groundwork for healthy societies of the future.

Escape from the Ivory Tower is part story, part philosophy, part illustration, and part how-to.

It has implications for American high schools and colleges, postgraduate education, adult education, and even primary schooling. It is for educators and administrators—university trustees, school board officials, principals, professors sitting on endowed chairs, and even elementary school teachers—and parents, as well as for community members who ask what their universities can do for them to meet their concerns and improve their lives. It is for educators and students not only here in the United States but also in other nations, as this country continues to be an international leader in higher education, exporting models of training and curricula through government and private programs worldwide.

In *Escape from the Ivory Tower*, we make our first report of a new and tested form of education that we call “democratic” and “experiential”: a form of education that combines the best features of discussion and interaction, laboratory work and field learning, community involvement and service, democratic citizenship and skills training, and student-initiated participatory learning into courses, projects, and clinical work that goes well beyond traditional classroom education. In an environment in which there is growing recognition of the value of nonclassroom learning, the successful models that we report on here incorporate the most effective attributes of—and go beyond—internships, service learning, independent study, and seminars.

In this book, we describe a model of education that starts with the intrinsic desires of students themselves—to learn, develop skills, and contribute to society—and with the needs of the com-

munities surrounding our universities for new ideas and tools to address real needs. It is our attention to student and community needs and participation that makes our view of education a democratic one. We have designed an educational model in which citizens are active participants and interact with each other to best negotiate their individual needs and use of their talents. In this model, educational institutions are community partners in creating a healthy and adaptive society, rather than isolated enclaves consuming hard-earned resources with little contribution in return.

For the past decade, we have taken the best features of what we found to be the most creative and inspired educational theories and have combined them with ideas of our own, of our professors, and of our students and classmates. We have applied and evaluated them in a number of different universities, in different disciplines, with students of varying interests and backgrounds.

What makes this book unique is that it offers pragmatic solutions and presents them from the perspective of perhaps the most important group in the debate on higher education and the future of American society: university and graduate students who are now becoming the next generation of scholars, citizens, and teachers.

Where other authors writing on higher education have pointed out its many flaws and have ended their arguments with exhortations to action, we take the debate one step beyond. This book goes beyond proposing a novel theory of what is wrong with higher education and how it can be improved: it presents tested solutions that have had unusual success and describes in detail how they can be adopted elsewhere as a part or full model of new curricula at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional school levels.

We have taken it upon ourselves to cut through the hyperbole and, too often, the animosity of current debates over higher education. Some of us have risked the early stages of our careers in an effort to cut to the real issues in educational reform and to develop genuine alternatives that work. We have done so with the understanding that progress might be slow and rewards might take time but that the effort would make it worthwhile and that we would see

success down the road, as we do. The different efforts that this book represents are not those of scholars who started out with the intention of putting books on dusty shelves. We intended to make a difference.

This book came to be because of our efforts as students (and those of our students) at America's top universities in several different fields. We took action despite our entrance into privilege at several of the premier universities in the United States (and the world). As we and our students now rise in the ranks of the educational community as professors, consultants, and scholars at the forefront of a new generation of faculty members, many of us have continued to be fed up with the quality of education at those institutions and with the focus of current debates on educational "reform." We believe that it is time for action and not just words.

As individuals differing in our specific goals but with a common purpose, we have been concerned less with turf battles and ideological warfare than with improving learning for ourselves and others and with integrating the university with the community. In doing so, we sought to create a model for American education in general.

With no resources but time, energy, and a sense of commitment and idealism—and with help from our students and many faculty members who were inspired by our energies and who inspired us—we began to design an alternative to what appears, to put it bluntly, as a growing intellectual and spiritual wasteland inside this country's universities. It was time for a new vision.

Audience

We present our findings here in a way that makes them immediately useful and understandable for a variety of audiences in the academic community.

- *For university faculty and administrators*, in particular, this book provides a vision of how education can be more effective in

imparting skills, how it can be less expensive, how it can inspire students to greater achievement, and how it can receive greater community support. Beyond general ideas, this book offers blueprints that can make even the besieged bureaucrat a community hero.

- *For universities whose reputations are based on research*, the models we present are a means of increasing and enriching research opportunities and of training future researchers. For social scientists, this book is an effort to clear away much of the rubble and ideology of Cold War social science; to produce theories that are grounded in social reality and empirical testing and that neither idealize nor mythologize because of short-term political needs. For those who seek to bridge the gaps between disciplines in universities, we present proven models for developing new interdisciplinary thinking and approaches.
- *For administrators and university trustees* who believe that universities must vigorously commit themselves to transmitting basic American values, teach basic skills necessary for citizens in a democracy, and improve American competitiveness, we present models of educational programs for communicating those values and concepts directly to communities and for teaching students the skills needed in a vital and dynamic economy and an international marketplace.
- *For students in colleges as well as in graduate and professional schools* (where some of the approaches we describe may be needed most), this book presents a how-to guide to starting exciting versions of learning within existing university programs.
- *For public servants, professionals, and ordinary citizens*—ranging from members of Congress, judges, and White House officials to business executives, union leaders, city planners, publishers, writers, entertainers, lawyers, and doctors—we extend our welcome to join in similar educational adventures and to make the most of this new form of learning. Already, there are

special university seminars for executives, summer programs for adults of all interests, and government fact-finding tours. Student adventures are both a kind of “reality tour” and a means of gaining a fresh perspective and a new empathy—one that is critical and informed.

- *For ordinary citizens who ask American universities to open their doors to studies of ethnic diversity and the variety of American and world cultures*, this book does not just open doors—it welcomes those outside in and beckons those inside to step out. It is part of a vision inherent in democratic ideals and values, put into practice in small ways and in sometimes unexpected places.

With our ideas for education, we seek to expand the concepts of what students and universities can achieve; we reach out to everyone and include the best that everyone can offer within our model of education. We demonstrate what today’s students can give to their communities and how they can take part in a dialogue while enhancing learning. We show how to return to a sense of morality, of sharedness and connectedness between students and the community. And we point out new ways to build skills in the type of consensus and personal responsibility that is an essential part of a working democracy.

We envision and have tested a kind of university education that can be adapted not only for university students but for all of those who retain a spark of curiosity and desire to learn and benefit their communities, whether at the local, national, or international level. We invite and encourage everyone to share in the educational courses and projects that we have developed, to participate in an educational adventure, and to experience the “unseen.”

A Special Message to Students

For undergraduates and graduate students, like those who created the programs on which this book is based, *Escape from the Ivory Tower* carries a special message: you can share in the excitement of

a new form of education that starts with your needs and interests, allows you to learn by doing, and enables you to make a real contribution to your community and the world in a way in which you are at the frontier of knowledge and the forefront of research. This is not another program that provides you with make-work assignments, turns you into a “gofer” or underemployed employee for credit, replaces education with work, or tries to convince you to follow a contrived and bureaucratic program.

One of the goals of this book is to take you along to share in the excitement of student adventures that we have proven to be successful at several of America’s top universities and that we envision in model curricula elsewhere. To help you get started, this book provides some of the basics for setting out on your own.

Faculty members and administrators may push for projects like these and expand the boundaries of the possible, if they choose. Foundations and community organizations may help fund them. But since there are structural reasons why they may not do so without prodding from students, enlightened donors, and community groups, we advocate that you, students, follow our example and take greater responsibility in your own education in designing courses and projects that test book learning in useful projects outside the classroom. We appeal to you (and young professors who are our contemporaries as leaders and designers of the projects in this book) to take courage and to make your own experiential democratic contributions to your college curricula.

As leaders and students, you have a unique advantage over the authors of this book, the student-entrepreneurs who designed these projects and sacrificed to implement them. You have precedents and successful models to draw from.

Within this book are examples of approved syllabi, application questions for detailed projects, statements of the philosophy of democratic experiential education, sample student “contracts,” and answers to the most commonly asked questions about innovative courses and projects. We present a few tips, along with a few warnings about problems to avoid.

The message of this book is simple.

Like all of the best ideas, those we present here with our practical suggestions and sample materials are “self-activating.” If you follow the instructions, you will essentially be teaching yourselves everything that you can learn in current university classes—and much more—with more fun, more confidence, and a greater sense of accomplishment.

Read the warning labels. Make a commitment. Be prepared for frustration and setbacks, hard work, and maybe some heartache. Then go for it. You can experience the intellectual excitement and rewards of student adventures in democratic experiential education on your own!

Overview of the Contents

This book is divided into two parts.

Part One (Chapters One through Three) concerns creating a new educational vision. It redirects the debate over American education—a debate that has lost sight of fundamental goals and has lost touch with the real problems that stand in the way of improving American education.

Here, we present a perspective that is unusual to find in print but that will resonate with most readers: an overview of how American universities appear from the point of view of students and communities. It is a much-needed reality check on politicized debates fueled by national media and by academic infighting—debates that touch on flash points in the society but are out of touch with the questions that those most affected by this paralyzing debate are asking about education.

We follow with a description of a democratic experiential philosophy of education, one that comes out of strong traditions in American culture but represents a distinct intellectual tradition from the prevailing view inside the bureaucracies of modern universities. We show how our philosophy is linked with a concept of rebuilding and revitalizing communities and of greater citizen participation, fulfillment, independence, and self-esteem.

It is not essential to start here. The reader who wishes to jump right to solutions and to avoid picking apart the debate can move to the second half of the book, in which we present our philosophy with real and practical solutions.

Part Two (Chapters Four through Ten) describes ideas for revitalizing American higher education through what we call *student adventures*. These ideas include models that have already been put into practice and can be tried elsewhere, and the ideas that follow from them, as part of an ideal model curriculum.

These ideas not only reflect a set of principles that can restore important values in higher education—a sense of community and moral values, consensus-building and democratic skills, and high standards of scholarship—but they are also easy to implement. They are even less costly than many current educational approaches that have sacrificed educational quality under the justification of cutting costs.

We include detailed descriptions and how-to materials for several different university courses that have already been tested successfully and for an international policy project (which took a group of students to Ecuador in its initial trial), and other detailed ideas for experiential courses at all levels of the university curriculum, including graduate and professional schools and complementing courses in several disciplines.

We also provide useful tips on setting up university projects, in the form of courses and of innovations that supplement the curriculum but are extracurricular, along with suggestions for coordinating them within existing universities.

Finally, we carry the ideas of earlier chapters even further, pointing the direction to go from here in order to remake the structure of higher education—its funding, its links to the community, and its view of its role and of the roles of faculty and students. It is here that we propose a fundamental change that we hope will start at the university level and permeate the educational system in the United States as well as in other countries seeking successful educational models for healthy and productive societies.

To make this book even easier to use, readers are welcome to copy parts of our syllabi without obtaining our written permission, since we are placing the syllabi in the public domain. Feel free to call us for any additional help you need in getting started.

Overall, the aim of this book is to share ideas for rekindling the spirit of America's young people for productive and fulfilling lives. It is a quest to reopen the American mind in every sense of the word.

Acknowledgments

As young scholars and professors now entering the teaching and consulting ranks and putting our newfound knowledge into practice to improve communities here and abroad, we owe a debt to a number of educators and friends who supported the efforts we began as students in designing new models of education.

Several faculty members in various departments at Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley encouraged, inspired, and sustained us. Were it not for their energies, interest, and spirit of listening to students and trying new ideas, our curricular experiments and educational models would never have had the chance to be tested or to survive. Besides giving us their intellectual enthusiasm and support, these special educators helped us negotiate university bureaucracies and taught us the strategies for institutionalizing positive reforms within existing university structures. These are skills in which formal education does not yet prepare students and that we share in this book as integral to the model of education we present. We thank Kennell Jackson, a professor in the Department of History at Stanford and a legendary resident fellow at Stanford's Branner Hall, William Muir of the Department of Political Science at University of California at Berkeley, Jack Potter of the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley, Robert Brentano of the Department of History at Berkeley, and Claudia Carr of the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at Berkeley.

We also owe our thanks to those educators, administrators, and students who came before us and who continue to advocate for

fresh approaches in education and to incorporate the best of the country's traditions of scholarship, service, and adventure. As founders of clinical programs, workshops, and forms of experiential and democratic education, they are too many to name beyond the few whom we cite directly in this book. Many of them—from whose dedication we benefit—we do not even know. But we owe them all our gratitude.

In developing our own programs under the rubric of Unseen America Projects, Inc., we owe a special thanks to those who stood by us as we crossed uncharted territory and who helped steady our course—in particular Steve Long, Debby Toomey, Randy Riley, and Marci Lempert-Riley. As board members and administrators of a new nonprofit organization, they helped us keep our dream alive through its first decade.

Much harder in America today than developing new ideas—or even overcoming the obstacles to testing them—is getting a chance to be heard. For too long, those who are seeking solutions have often been relegated to the “unseen.” For helping us to amplify our voices so that others can learn from and apply our experience, we thank Steve Rutter, who generously directed us to Jossey-Bass after taking an interest in this book, and Gale Erlandson, who tirelessly helped us to strengthen our message and to reach those to whom that message is most useful.

Finally, we owe our thanks to our students—whose sense of adventure, thirst for knowledge, and willingness to experiment inspired us to design even more effective and interesting models of learning—and to the many different people and communities who shared their experiences and time with us. Not only did members of local and foreign communities join with us as part of a shared adventure of learning but they also opened themselves to new ideas and probing questions from students who pushed them to reconsider and improve their ways of doing things. They are the real heroes and beneficiaries of democratic experiential education.

Washington, D.C.
September 1995

David H. Lempert and contributors

The Authors

David H. Lempert professor, educational and international development consultant, and attorney, is the founder of Unseen America Projects, Inc., and an associate professor (adjunct) at George Washington University. He first taught The Unseen America at Stanford University in 1985 and Adventure in International Development Planning (the Ecuador Project) in 1988. With a student team, he produced a report for the president of Ecuador, published in English as *A Model Development Plan: New Strategies and Perspectives*.

Lempert earned his B.A. degree in economics and political science from Yale University (1980), his J.D. and M.B.A. degrees from Stanford University (1985), and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in social anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley (1992).

Escape from the Ivory Tower completes his trilogy of works on social revitalization, covering social and economic development (*A Model Development Plan*), legal and political structural reform (*A Return to Democracy: The Modern Democracy Amendments*), and educational reform. These works complement his interdisciplinary theoretical models of complex societies and processes of change (*Daily Life in a Crumbling Empire: The Absorption of Russia into the World Economy*, three books in two volumes) and his works of fiction and poetry.

Lempert has worked as a development consultant in the Philippines, Costa Rica, Russia, and Ukraine and on projects for Kazakhstan and Lithuania. He has taught at George Washington University, Leningrad/St. Petersburg State University, the University of California at Berkeley, and Stanford University, and he has designed curricula for universities in Vietnam and Bulgaria.

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