



Book Review: *Bridges not Blockades: Transcending University Politics*

JULIA L. FARMER

ABSTRACT

This review of *Bridges not Blockades: Transcending University Politics* offers an overview of the book's content. It then reflects on how ombuds might find areas of commonality with many of the volume's contributors and use the book as a resource for thinking about ways to frame their own offices' utility. In addition, the review identifies areas in which ombuds practice might diverge from the suggestions found in certain essays.

KEYWORDS

Ombuds, higher education, universities, collaboration, faculty, leadership



In *Bridges not Blockades: Transcending University Politics*, editors Gayle Maddox and Martha Diede compile essays from contributors who consider a range of ways in which strife manifests itself on college and university campuses. The essays suggest how campus constituents can do their part to work on transcending what divides us. Contributions are generally inspired by the personal experiences of the authors themselves, and while ombuds offices are largely absent from the discussions, practicing ombuds will certainly find the importance of their role to be an unspoken constant of the book.

The opening chapters in the volume offer an overview of some ways in which the “building bridges” metaphor that informs the book’s title can be applied to the world of higher education. In chapter 1, Maddox reviews a litany of political challenges currently facing American colleges and universities and, with a reference to Nero’s famed fiddling while Rome burned, concludes that the internal arguments overtaking much of academia only serve to distract us from the dangers lurking beyond campus. (It should be noted that while the book’s introduction focuses on the American political context, the general collaborative principles underlying the volume also make it a potentially useful resource for ombuds practicing in the international higher ed arena.) Chapter 2, by Betty A. Block, elaborates on the metaphor of university as organism, with each part needing to be intricately connected to the other in order to sustain the homeostasis of the living whole. Similarly, in chapter 3, Anita Fitzgerald Henck reflects on the many roles that she has held at universities over the years (one of which, she mentions very much in passing, was ombuds) and concludes that “collaboration through bridge building... has been central to most individual and institutional successes” (35).

The next cluster of chapters in the book offers examples of stakeholders at the contributors’ respective institutions who have worked to build bridges while fighting for and upholding key moral standards. Chapter 4, by Andrew Adams, focuses on the evolution of the American Association of University Professors’ stance on certain issues over the decades, putting particular emphasis on policies related to discrimination and collegiality. In chapter 5, Melanie Springer Mock reflects on her experiences as a journalism professor and student newspaper adviser who has had to navigate the tensions between the university’s leaders and student reporters “who are willing to call out administrators...who would rather quash dissenting voices than let the truth be told” (84). In chapter 6, two Western Carolina University faculty members—Amy Murphy-Nugen and Charmion Rush—and two former students—Antonio M. Oakley Jr. and Carleen (Tenae) Turner—discuss a history of concerns about racial discrimination on their campus that led to faculty/student collaboration and the founding of the Wheel Matter movement.

If chapters 4 through 6 focused on group advocacy, the next set of contributions revolves more around the ways in which individual faculty members (particularly ones who are new to the academy) can focus on building bridges. Chapter 7, by Elwood Watson, offers a list of dos and don’ts that new faculty members should be aware of as they navigate relationships on campus. Martha Diede’s contribution in chapter 8, meanwhile, focuses on the ways in which strong partnerships across campus can make all the difference when it comes to pursuing tenure. And in chapter 9, spouses Drew and Emily Virtue look at strategies that academic couples facing the two-body problem can use to search for employment opportunities that will meet both of their needs, as well as the ways in which dual-career hiring programs and policies can strengthen the universities that implement them.

As the volume nears its conclusion, the next triad of articles looks at bridge building less from the perspective of faculty and more from that of leadership. In chapter 10, Steve Estes examines the qualities in academic leaders (i.e., administrators) that generally make them successful in heading up the faculty. Then, Laura M. Pipe, who heads UNC-Greensboro’s Teaching Innovations Office, writes about the importance of collaboration across campus for the success of her unit. In chapter 12, Rochelle L. Ford, dean of Elon University School of Communications,



discusses the key role that listening, showing empathy, and demonstrating respect for all members of the campus community have played for her in her own path to becoming a leader. As she puts it, “Developing mutually beneficial relationships has helped me to excel as a higher education leader at multiple levels” (175).

The book’s final chapters take things back in a more general direction, with insights relevant to all those who work on a university campus. David A. Shapiro’s chapter looks at bridge building in the context of professional development, and in their final chapter, the volume’s editors conclude with a takeaway of the tenets that they consider essential for navigating university politics. These include the ideas that empathy is crucial, that there are real human beings behind every job on campus, that context matters, and that forgiveness is essential because everyone makes mistakes. One piece of advice in the book’s final paragraph almost sounds as though it could have come from an ombuds brochure: “We can give ourselves time to process tough situations and circumstances. Few people turn down requests for a little time to consider our options before providing responses...” (202).

It’s somewhat striking that a book focused on bridge building in academia makes basically no mention of the good work that ombuds offices do in that area, but perhaps it’s not that surprising. After all, many of the book’s contributors are from Western Carolina University, whose ombuds program was short-lived. Had the program lasted, perhaps the ombuds as university bridge-builder would have made more of an appearance in the book. That said, ombuds who are new to working in higher education may find useful this book’s overview of some of the sorts of conflicts typical in that arena.

Where *Bridges* may strike some ombuds—and particularly more experienced ombuds—as occasionally problematic is in its tendency at certain points to prescribe rather generic “fixes,” rather than to acknowledge the complex power structures at play in many conflicts on campus. One essay’s emphasis on civility, for example, elides the oft-problematic history behind that term, which was recently explored, among other places, in Alex Zamalin’s *Against Civility: The Hidden Racism in Our Obsession with Civility* (2021). The *Bridges* editors’ closing emphasis on forgiveness, similarly, espouses a one-size-fits-all approach to difficult situations that many ombuds would likely hesitate to endorse, given their role’s emphasis on helping visitors find the best path for themselves.

That said, any book that can help ombuds promote the need for a campus space focused on building bridges—and helping others learn to do so—should be seen as a welcome addition to the field. Ombuds will certainly find common ground with many of the people represented in the essays, whether it’s the student journalists speaking truth to power, the academic couple working toward creative solutions to a challenging problem, or the dean who believes in the power of listening, showing empathy, and demonstrating respect.



REFERENCES

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AUTHOR BIO

Julia Farmer Julia Farmer is the Director of Ombuds Services at the University of West Georgia, where she has worked for the past 14 years. She holds a Master's degree in Conflict Management from Kennesaw State University, as well as a B.A. in Spanish and Italian from Bryn Mawr College and a Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literatures from the University of California, Berkeley (jfarmer@westga.edu).