An Interview with Dr. Peter Dreier, E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics at Occidental College, the keynote speaker at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, Urban Studies Forum (Spring 2012) with Patricia Najera, PhD student in Urban Studies.

The interview was a semi-structured interview to learn about Dr. Dreier’s hopes about graduate school, obtaining his PhD, working outside of the academy and how his passion for cities developed during his formative years in high school. Below are some of Dr. Dreier’s responses to these questions. For those interested in learning about Dr. Dreier’s involvement in grassroots campaigns on housing issues and his transition from the academy to community work, the full transcript can be downloaded at the Urban Studies Website.

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Patricia Najera (Q):

When you first got your PhD, what were your hopes?

Peter Dreier (A):

I tell my students that if they don’t know what they want to do with the rest of their lives at 18 years of age, this is ok. My career has been like a pinball machine, all over the place. My undergraduate degree was in journalism; I was a newspaper reporter for a while, a community organizer, government official (Assistant to the Mayor of Boston), a researcher for policy think tanks, and a college professor.

My becoming a college professor happened by accident. I went to graduate school to recharge my intellectual batteries, took some courses; I liked it and got my PhD. I wasn’t planning on becoming a professor. My PhD is related to work I was doing before; I was at the University of Chicago in the Sociology Department. When I was in Chicago, there was a movement mostly among young journalists to get their newspapers to be more sensitive to issues of race and social justice. They started a magazine called the Chicago Journalism Review and they got organized to give reporters a stronger voice in the newsroom. Some young reporters got more involved in the union, the Newspaper Guild. I call this movement the “newsroom democracy” movement. The same thing was happening in other professions, like city planning, social work, and others, where younger activists sought to “democratize” their professions, in part by organizing “radical caucuses” within professional associations and within their work places. Journalists are supposed to be “objective” in their reporting, but that their newspapers were often biased with regard to class, race, and gender issues, and they wanted to change the ways their papers covered urban issues. I wrote my dissertation about the “newsroom democracy” movement. I did “field work” on Chicago’s two major daily papers, the Chicago Tribune and Sun-Times. The Tribune had long been a right-wing newspaper in the 40s, 50s, 60s, and even the 70s. The Sun-Times was started in the 1940s by Marshall Field as a liberal, Democratic pro-New Deal and pro-union paper. By the 1970s, when I moved to Chicago, the two papers were basically the same in terms of how
they covered the news. I wanted to learn how that happened. I discovered that earlier in the 1900s, Chicago had about 10 daily newspapers; then (in the 1970) the number was reduced to four (although with only two owners, each of whom owned a morning and an afternoon newspaper). Now there are only two daily papers left2. My dissertation looked at how the newspaper industry had changed and how the journalism profession had changed.

**Patricia Najera (Q):**

When did your passion for cities begin?

**Peter Dreier (A):**

I grew up in Plainfield, New Jersey, which is outside Newark. Both cities had riots in 1967. There was a lot of racial discrimination and segregation in the city, at my high school, and in the way the police dealt with the city’s black population. So, I was aware pretty early in life about the racial injustice around me.

**Patricia Najera (A):**

What kinds of things did you see?

**Peter Dreier (A):**

The city was racially segregated, in terms of where people lived. I played baseball in high school and many of the players on the team were black, and became my friends. Plainfield had two black ghettos—a lower-income ghetto and a middle-income ghetto. So, it was pretty obvious that the city was segregated. Even before high school, I played on a neighborhood team and kids were mostly white, Jewish, and Italian, the others were mostly black. In high school, I was active in my Reform synagogue youth group. The synagogue was very liberal, worked on civil rights issues; our Rabbi was involved in civil rights in various ways. In the synagogue youth group, we used to do charity work at local black settlement house in the black ghetto of the town. In retrospect, it was charity but when I was 15-16 years old, I did not see it this way. When I was in high school, Michael Harrington came to speak at my temple. He wrote the book, The Other America, about poverty in America, in 1962. President Kennedy and President Johnson read it (or at least their top staff people read it), and this book inspired the War on Poverty; and it became a best seller, a book that everyone read. Harrington was a brilliant speaker; I later became friends with him. He came to speak at my temple, when I was 15 or 16 years old. He said that poverty was part of America, part of the economic system that some people benefit from the existence of poverty. He presented a structural analysis and pointed out that to address poverty we need policies and a movement that promotes social justice. He was a socialist; he did not talk about socialism. He talked about social justice. He opened my eyes. I read the book in high school. When I got to college, I majored in sociology and journalism and wanted to change the world and got involved in a variety of activist causes, including working with the poor in the ghetto adjacent to the Syracuse campus, and the anti-war movement.

**Patricia Najera (Q):**
Once you obtained your PhD, what was your first job?

**Peter Dreier (A):**

I received my PhD at the University of Chicago in 1977. But before I finished the dissertation, I moved to California in 1975 to be a visiting professor at UC-Santa Barbara and to work on Tom Hayden’s campaign for the U.S. Senate. He was one of the first 60s radicals who decided to run for political office. He ran against the incumbent Democrat, Senator John Tunney. His campaign was about “economic democracy,” about building on the movements for the environment, tenant’s rights, workers’ rights, and other issues. Tom ran a great campaign and got almost 40% of the vote. Tunney won the Democratic primary but lost the run-off to a conservative Republican. Tom Hayden was eventually elected to the California legislature and had a big impact. I got my PhD in 1977 and moved to Boston to take a teaching job at Tufts University. It taught there until 1983. While teaching at Tufts, I got involved in a lot of community organizing and public interest projects. Every few years I took a year off, to do some organizing work to not lose touch. I helped start a statewide tenant rights organization in Massachusetts. I worked with the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group, one of the networks of PIRG groups started by Ralph Nader. I did some work with a community-organizing group called Massachusetts Fair Share.

**Patricia Najera (Comment):**

It is great that you would go back to the community to do organizing work.

**Peter Dreier (A):**

Staying engaged in the real world of politics and organizing helps my teaching and my writing. It connects me to things that are happening. If you don’t do this, your teaching gets stale. You are teaching without doing. I’m concerned that there are a lot of so-called “radical” professors on campus today who have no clue about the real world of social activism and reform. This is especially true among scholars who are most of the “post modern” movement. This is really one of my pet peeves. They think they are radical talking about economic injustice, gender injustice, and racial injustice. But when students question faculty and say “ok, you say how screwed up the world is, but should we being doing about it,” these so-called “radical” faculty say some version of: “I don’t know and it’s not my job. I just tell you how bad things are.” Students feel awful. Students get depressed and demoralized. I’ve come across faculty who teach about racial issues who claim that things are as bad as now as fifty or sixty years ago, during the Jim Crow era. That is ridiculous, and factually incorrect, but many students, who have no other historical perspective, hear this and believe it. Saying this means that they think that the Civil Rights movement had no impact whatsoever, which is demoralizing and untrue. If you believe that – if you believe that progressive movements haven’t improved our society in different ways, then why get up in the morning and do anything? Of course, there is still racism and sexism and pollution, and so on. But that doesn’t mean that the civil rights movement, feminist movement, environmental movement didn’t make a big difference in our everyday lives, in public policy, in how we think about
things. There is an attack on Planned Parenthood right now. Why? Because thanks to the women’s movement, women, now, have the right to an abortion. When I was growing up, abortions were illegal. It’s important that faculty get involved in what is going on to give students a sense of hope.

I am lucky that I teach at a college that allows me the freedom to get students engaged. I teach a course in community organizing, where all students do internships with community groups, unions, environmental justice groups, women’s rights groups, and others. We started a program called Campaign Semester that allows our students to spend an entire semester off campus working on a political campaign and getting a full-semester credit for it. Next fall (2012) we’ll have 32 students working all over the country, in battleground races, learning about the real world of political campaigns. I’m on the board of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy; I work with tenants’ rights groups and community groups like the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE). I started a parent-organizing group in public school system in Pasadena, where most of the students come from low income, immigrant’s families. This involvement makes me a better teacher, connects me with students, helps me help them get jobs and internships in LA, or Boston, New York, DC and elsewhere.

Patricia Najera (Q):

How did you transition from the Academy to government?

Peter Dreier (A):

I started teaching at Tufts University, outside Boston. There were a lot of tenants’ rights groups working on battles for rent control in Boston, Somerville, Cambridge, and other cities. But the real estate industry was really powerful and tried to get the state legislature to pre-empt the ability of local cities to adopt rent control and laws protecting tenants from unfair evictions and skyrocketing rents and condominium conversions. But there was no statewide advocacy or lobbying group at the state level. So, I took a year off during a sabbatical, and with a few other activists, I raised some money, approached some foundations, and started a statewide tenant rights group called the Massachusetts Tenants Organization. It played an important role in changing the balance of power around housing issues in the state.

An in depth conversation about Peter Dreier’s experience with Mayor Ray Flynn and the City of Boston to learn about the intersections of community organizing, politics, and public policy issues can be accessed on-line.

Since you have been at Occidental College, you teach courses and write articles. Why do you do this?
What audience are you trying to reach?

I have a job that provides access to lots of information-time to write. I also have tenure, so I don’t have to worry about job security. Since joining the Occidental faculty, I’ve written or co written four books and lots of academic articles, but mostly what I write is for a broader audience, in newspapers, magazines, and websites. I think it is important to translate ideas and come out of academia for the general public. I want my work to have an influence in shaping public opinion and public policy, in part
by working with unions, environmental groups, and community groups, or working with progressive politicians. For example, I write a lot of op-ed columns for the Los Angeles Times. And I’ve written reports, on my own and with some of my colleagues, on various issues, on behalf of various nonprofit advocacy groups. We often hire students to help us with the research, which gives them real hands-on experience and helps them see how the real world of policy and politics works. I’ve worked with the LA Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), ACCE, the hotel workers union, and others. I’ve been on the board of the United Way, on several City Council task forces, and worked with the Catholic Archdiocese on housing and homeless issues. I think it is important, that Professors have an audience beyond academia. It helps to have a Dr. in front of your name and a PhD at the end of your name. It gives you credibility. You can have an audience beyond academia. When Rachel Maddow interviewed me on her TV show, she was able to say that my research about media coverage of ACORN was done by an academic and published in an academic journal. This sounds better than a report by an advocacy watchdog group. It means it was vetted by academics. Publishing helps with tenure and legitimizes your work for the general public.

I like to write to general audiences, I want to write what people can understand. My latest book is a book of popular history, “The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame,” which profiles activists, artists, academics, politicians, musicians, and others who have been involved in the great social justice movements. At some colleges, it is hard to get tenure unless you write academic stuff, jump through the academic hoops, and even if nobody reads what you write. More and more colleges and universities are now recognizing that “applied” research is important, too, and are counting it as a standard for tenure and promotion. At Oxy, we are trying to create a situation where faculty to get recognized for research in the community.

Patricia Najera (Q):

**What are the most pressing issues facing students today?**

Peter Dreier (A):

Debt is the most pressing issue facing students today. Most students come out of college burdened with debt that takes years to pay off. It is the biggest burden facing many working class and middle class families. It means that our government isn’t investing enough in financial aid for students. That is really shortsighted. College The price of college is going up faster than family income. The percentage of tuition covered by the Pell grants and other forms of financial aid is declining. Obama did a good thing by eliminating private lenders processing student loans profiting from this practice. In France, students go to college free, tuition is supported by the government. In California, 30-40 years ago, it used to be free. Now it’s very expensive, not as expensive as private college. We have to pay to go to college.

Patricia Najera (Q):

What do you tell students who cannot get jobs?

Peter Dreier (A):
For students who major in Urban Environmental Policy, there are lots of jobs. Our students tend to go to graduate school in urban planning, or public health, or public policy, or social work. A lot of them want to work with in advocacy groups, unions, and community organizing groups. The labor movement has a lot of jobs. Unions generally pay reasonably well. They are always looking for organizers, researchers, even communications folks. I don’t mind using my connections to help students get jobs. I see that as part of my job as a teacher. The problem right now is that Republicans changing the law on reducing interest rate on student loans.

Patricia Najera (Q): Thank you for this interview.

Peter Dreier (A): You’re welcome.