



Why the Evaluation of Faculty Community Engaged Scholarship Needs Clear Criteria

John Saltmarsh, University of Massachusetts-Boston
Gene Corbin, University of Massachusetts-Boston
Prabdeep Singh Kehal, Brown University

On campuses across the United States, “community engaged scholarship” has emerged as a promising strategy for problem-solving research, civic education, and revitalizing the democratic aspirations of higher education. Originally in response to student and social movement activists of the 1960s and 1970s who fought to make higher education a public good in practice rather than in theory, community engaged scholarship aimed to bring an aspirational democracy committed to equity into higher education’s role in society. This kind of scholarly work connects the core purpose of higher education—the generation and dissemination of knowledge—to efforts to address critical public issues.

Faculty accomplish these vital aims by bringing collaborations with off-campus community partners into their teaching, service, and research and creative activities. In such engaged scholarly activities, faculty collaborate with community partners to advance knowledge and students develop a sense of responsibility to society along with the capacity to act effectively on matters of public importance. Engaging communities in teaching and research increases relevance and improves outcomes.

Community engaged scholarship depends upon mutually beneficial partnerships between campuses and local, regional, national, and global communities. By forging mutually beneficial partnerships between the academy and the community, the resources of higher education are leveraged to address social issues while instilling a passion for civic and democratic engagement in young people. In a time when the relevance and benefits of higher education are questioned by many critics, community engaged scholarship counters ivory-tower stereotypes.

Community Engaged Scholarship and How It is Evaluated

In the 1990s, efforts to broaden conceptions of teaching and research beyond lectures and publishing in peer-reviewed academic journals, resulted in a reconsideration of how scholarly work should be evaluated. For example, regarding research, Glassick and others wrote in 1997 that “documentation must be open to a more eclectic array of materials in order to treat newer forms of scholarship fairly. This would mean including more genres of published and unpublished work.” More recently, scholars have made the case that both traditional and community engaged research should be evaluated for quality by assessing whether it is appropriately informed by:

- **Approach:** by a deep, broad and relevant base of knowledge, practices and contexts
- **Methods:** whether the work was conducted using a systematic, consistent set of methods
- **Impact:** whether there is evidence that the work has had its intended impact to an explicit audience
- **Significance:** whether the work makes an important contribution to an explicit audience

Unfortunately, community engaged scholarship often remains unrewarded in faculty research, teaching, and service. Scholars and higher education administrators struggle because there are no widely agreed upon standards for how this important work should be evaluated. Both faculty pursuing promotion and tenure, and members of committees evaluating these candidates, need specific guidance on how community engaged scholarship will be considered in faculty review processes. A lack of clear guidance on evaluating community engaged scholarship can lead to the inability to provide a full and fair evaluation for all faculty. This can disproportionately affect minoritized faculty who are more likely to convey a strong commitment to scholarship that addresses social issues and has community impact, and broadly, affect all faculty if policies are not clear about faculty rewards for community engaged scholarship.

Criteria for Evaluating Community Engaged Scholarship

For community engaged scholarship to be fully and fairly evaluated, it needs to be clearly and consistently defined to account for both its process and product dimensions. The process dimension evaluates the methods, partnership, and purpose of the scholarly activity. The product dimension evaluates the outcomes resulting from the scholarly activity along with impact.

The evaluation of the community engaged scholarship process should determine whether the scholar:

- Used a systematic, appropriate, and consistent set of methods
- Demonstrated discipline-specific expertise, innovation, replicability, and/or documentation
- Collaborated with a community partner in a manner that was reciprocal and respectful
- Addressed an issue of importance to the partnering community

The evaluation of community engaged scholarship products should determine whether:

- The scholarly project holds significance for the relevant academic discipline(s) and makes an important contribution by opening up a field, creating approaches, challenging understanding, enhancing foundations for future work, broadening participation, or integrating previously distinct concepts or approaches.
- The results of the scholarship were disseminated beyond disciplinary journals read only by specialized academics. For example, the products could be included in reports, exhibits, multimedia presentations, installations, policy briefs, court briefings, legislation, or the many other products disseminated to public audiences.
- There is evidence that the scholarly work had its intended impact to an explicit audience in addressing community issues.

In addition to these key features, both academics and relevant non-academics should be reviewing the results from community engaged projects to determine the societal impacts and academic contributions and evaluation systems on campus should recognize this equally. As part of the evaluation of community engaged scholarship, the peer in the peer-review processes will often need to be reframed to recognize that a knowledge expert may be a non-academic, community collaborator, and this particularly matters for promotion and tenure evaluations of faculty work.

How Higher Education Can Fulfill Its Democratic Aspirations

Properly evaluating and rewarding community engaged scholarship is an essential factor in the evolution of higher education. Doing so recognizes that approaches to advancing knowledge evolve as social, economic, political, and civic questions of disciplines change over time and our evaluation of rewards must as well. Providing clear and consistent criteria for evaluating community engaged scholarship allows campus leaders, state policy makers, boards of higher education, faculty senates, faculty unions, higher education organizations, and academic disciplinary associations to shape and support community engaged scholarship.

Full and fair evaluation of community engaged scholarship is also essential for creating institutional environments in which a new generation of faculty members can thrive. Clear and consistent evaluation policies and processes are critical in order to recognize the scholarship of the next generation of faculty members who are increasingly from more diverse backgrounds and more likely to express a commitment to community engaged scholarship. Clear and consistent evaluation of community engaged scholarship will advance research that has a broad social impact, assist communities in addressing social issues, and improve student learning via active and collaborative learning. Community engaged scholarship, if fully and fairly evaluated, can enable higher education to achieve its vital civic and democratic aspirations.

Read more in KerryAnn O'Meara, Timothy Eatman, and Saul Petersen, "Advancing Engaged Scholarship in Promotion and Tenure: A Roadmap and Call for Reform," *Liberal Education* 101, no. 3 (2015): 52-57; "Evaluation Criteria for the Scholarship of Engagement," Clearinghouse and National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement, 2002 ; Charles E. Glassick, Mary Taylor Huber, and Gene I. Maeroff, *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate* (Jossey-Bass, 1997).