



How Scholars Can Become Influential Public Professors

M. V. Lee Badgett, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Many who enter university life do so with hopes to further social improvements – to make the world a fairer, greener, healthier, more democratic, more abundant, or happier place. But inside the ivory tower idealistic aspirations can be swamped by competing demands. Scholars learn how to write for disciplinary journals and talk to students, but most do not learn how to get their ideas and findings into public discussions.

So how have certain university scholars landed on the public stage and learned to use their research to change hearts, minds, and policy? To figure out how some colleagues have managed this and lay out a path that others can follow – to become what I call “public professors” – I have studied the careers of some influential public professors. In addition, I draw insights from my own participation in the marriage equality and other debates as a scholar, expert witness, and co-founder of a think tank. This public debate was one to which many scholars effectively contributed.

Successful public professors, I learned, still play by scholarly rules. They are first of all good academic researchers and have resumes with the peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and grants needed to prove their academic standing. They don't stop there, though. Effective publicly engaged scholars also do three additional things that can be instructive for others: they grasp the big picture, learn to communicate with multiple audiences, and build diverse networks.

Pinpointing Where Research Can Contribute

Accomplished public scholars develop a sense of the big picture of a policy debate to identify a role for their research and ideas. Thinking about social change as a team sport, public professors identify key players in government, business, social movements, and communities. They analyze the ongoing debates and pinpoint where their research can answer questions for key players. Fairness might motivate efforts to increase the minimum wage, for example, but the debate will center on whether jobs will be lost – and research has something to say about that.

The best public professors learn the rules of the game that shape players' decisions. Labor economist Teresa Ghilarducci studied pensions early in her career, learning enough about the concerns of unions and employers and about the regulatory details to make her a valued player on pension boards. Eventually she developed a new idea for Guaranteed Retirement Accounts that is gaining considerable public traction.

Learning to Communicate with Diverse Audiences

Public professors excel at communicating their research to diverse audiences. Conservative communications guru Frank Luntz gets right to the point: “It's not what you say, it's what people hear.” For scholars, developing a clear message stripped of academic jargon goes a long way to engaging public audiences. Because people
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believe research-based messages that fit their existing beliefs, publicly engaged scholars must find ways to get a hearing, like working with messengers who share an audience's values. This may mean teaming up with unlikely validators such as ministers or priests, military officers, or adherents of a different political ideology.

As for what to say, public scholars should not repeat things that are wrong but should repeat their own messages again and again. This may seem tiresome, but chances to repeat a research-based message are a sign that a public scholar is in high demand.

Specific tips can help with different forms of communication. In interviews with journalists, scholars can engage in conversation to make sure they understand key points. And journalists live on Twitter these days, so scholars should use this medium. When it comes to live audiences, scholars should practice good old-fashioned stagecraft. Do not read papers – tell stories, look listeners in the eye, and convey passion about research.

Building Broad Networks

Successful publicly engaged professors develop wide-ranging professional networks. They get to know journalists, policymakers, lawyers, community activists, businesspeople, and other leaders, real-world partners who can carry ideas and research into important places to which professors may not have access – into the backrooms and boardrooms where policy decisions get made.

These relationships aren't always easy to start or maintain, but they can be very rewarding. In what experts call the "two cultures" problem, academics and policymakers have different training and incentives and operate in different timeframes. But if scholars manage to learn about the realities faced by people in business, government, nonprofits, or social movements, they can communicate more effectively with those groups.

The Effort is Worth It

Obviously, it takes time to grasp the big picture, learn to communicate, and network widely. For aspiring public professors, effectiveness happens not all at once, not overnight, but in steps taken bit by bit over a career. Some worry that these steps steal time from research or teaching. However, many experienced public professors find that their teaching and research benefit from new partnerships, better communication skills, and new funding opportunities that can come from public engagement. Career prospects may even improve when professors involved in public life can demonstrate to tenure, promotion, and hiring committees that their engagement has enriched their research and teaching. Aspiring publicly engaged scholars can get to know others in their area and learn to tell their own career stories in ways that integrate civic achievements. They can ask for letters of support from public partners who matter to their universities. And of course senior scholars who value public engagement can highlight the intellectual value of such achievements in promotion reviews.

As the careers of effective public professors reveal, each just took the plunge at some point, jumping in to make connections with partners who could use their work. Public engagement by academics takes time and effort, but turns out to be mutually empowering. All scholars have the potential to collaborate beyond the ivory tower and make a real difference in peoples' lives.

Read more in M.V. Lee Badgett, *The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World* (New York University Press, 2016). This article was adapted with permission from "Becoming a Public Professor," *Contexts*, Winter 2016.