

Considering Community-Engaged Scholarship

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The 1990 Boyer report on scholarship in higher education did not initiate the debate but certainly focused attention on the question of what role academic research should play in the lives of the public at large. Boyer identified four types of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. In speaking of the scholarship of application, he asked the question, “How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems” (Boyer 1990, p. 22)? For Boyer, application was one of the ways that the scholarship of discovery (the top of Boyer’s hierarchy) was made manifest. The Boyer model at its most effective is a technology transfer model. The power of already-developed theory, problem solving strategies, data collection skills, analytical approaches and the like are brought to bear on community problems deemed consequential.

Boyer did not satisfy the growing number of critics of traditional research that was appearing at the turn of the century. They saw Boyer as presenting a top-down model in which the expert researcher brings the fruits of science to the citizen within problem frameworks deemed consequential by the researcher. The problem and the solution was entirely under his or her ownership. It did not change the character of research only its venue. Researchers used communities to enliven the journals with real people but returned little of value to the people’s real problems. Often times the consequential problem addressed was the traditional problem of the success of the professorate at the expense of the community.

Community Engaged Scholarship

Community engaged scholarship (AKA community-based research) is a movement that both struggles with and seeks to resolve the difficulties with the scholarship of Boyer’s model. The movement is fueled by a generalized discontent with how things are currently done in the

academy with out any clear consensus of how to do them differently. If the details of the practice are yet to be ironed out what does seem to be clear and unifying are a set of values and a call for action.

The call for action is simple in its statement but complex in its execution. The call is to locate a substantial amount of the research activity of the academy—particularly public health and social science research but also engineering and the biological sciences—physically, culturally, and intellectually in the communities that both support and are to benefit from that research. Further, the research undertaken needs to be participatory, collaborative, and inclusive of the members of those communities, taking into account their interests and goals as well their insights and knowledge (see, for example, Global Alliance, 2008).

As a postmodern epistemologist (now there is an oxymoron), the call represents a marked departure from our traditional conceptualization and description of research. It not only bridges, it obliterates Hume's gap that presumably existed to separate science from value, immersing the researcher in the political aspirations of the community. It crashes through any façade of independence and objectivity—a façade that I as a postmodernist would consider to be a rhetorical stance at any rate. The call recognizes the limitations of institutionally certified knowledge and opens itself to other certifications including local ones. And in that recognition it also redirects the goals of research from simple publication in the archive of knowledge (our peer reviewed, flagship journals) to research with demonstrable consequences in the lives of others.

Tensions of CES

Like it or not, the call creates a set of tensions within the academy. Engaged scholars often see themselves as challenging old, less productive, more insular ways of doing things. They criticize clinical and laboratory research as detached science, culturally insensitive, lacking ecological validity, populated by lone-wolf scientists, elitist researchers, and arrogant academics.

They point to the skills and strategies that are often in short supply among such academics, including language training with the majority of the professorate fluent in a single language (and often one—academize--spoken only by a few).

Traditionals for their part see themselves as upholding well-established standards. They see CES scholars away from their office for long stretches, out there chatting people up, with little to show on their RPT record. They often counsel—as I have done—that community engagement is wonderfully important, but it is risky and not a risk one should take prior to tenure. (The unintended consequences of that advice is that we tend to continue in what we are successful and fail to return to the practices of community engagement.) Traditionals are also concerned that the research that is produced is—well—practical, applied, a lesser god (in the Boyer pantheon) that will not appear in traditional journals and, consequently, does not represent the institution as well. And finally there is the issue of the presumed loss of objectivity, the political liability, the researcher gone native, the appearance of the activist, casting doubt on the research itself and invoking possible political dangers for the institution. And quite frankly, where is our return on overhead?

Attractions of CES

Even with the tensions and risks that surround it, there is a great attraction to community engagement. It promises publishable research that meets R1 university standards and simultaneously create a climate of trust and mutual support between the university and the community. It uses the power of collaboration to achieve a more complex understanding of the circumstances the research is attempting to explain. You get better insights and implications from the research when they are developed in concert with those who live the life. The lives of others can validate our scholarship. It provides clear markers of accomplishment and authentic moments of satisfaction for a job well done.

There are a couple of subtexts in that paragraph: One is that traditional research does not provide these outcomes—or at least not as well. The other is that regardless of our discipline, we should be making a difference. Indeed, if our research does nothing more than advance us—the academy, the professoriate—then we are just another elite living off the sweat of others. These subtexts have some bite to them. And I am not sure they are entirely defensible. On the other hand they cause us just enough pause that there might be some truth to them.

Officially and in real practical terms the University of Utah supports community engaged scholarship. Senior Vice President David Pershing has called the university “a national leader” in CES pointing to the award winning work of the Bennion Center with its hundreds of thousands of hours of successful projects and of the University Neighborhood Partners which for its part has joined nearly 12,000 neighborhood residents to create opportunities for information exchange, leadership training, civic engagement, citizenship preparation, and college admission. The Vice President’s office has funded and continues to fund projects in CES. I have been able to identify over 40 faculty who have active research projects that meet at least some part of the CES standard. There are probably three times that number in actual fact.

Impediments to CES

Consequently we have good top administration support and a growing grass roots movement. But we have not been particularly successful at the departmental and college level. A survey of faculty conducted last spring by my research associate Jennifer Hill using long form interviews showed that most departments would consider engaged scholarship to be service—not research and that there was little incentive provided by colleges to engage the community. As one respondent put it “that’s not the kind of research that faculty get rewarded for.” And another said, “I don’t think people are going to engage just . . . because it’s the right thing to do . . . on top of everything else that you have to do to survive.”

There are a number of issues that percolate at the department level. The strong program in CES represents an ideological sea-change in the practice of research that can result in misunderstanding and competition among faculty. CES presents an uncertain return on the time and resource investment that faculty are required to make.. For example, some departments might be willing to wait three to four years for a book to appear, but would not grant a community-based research project that time to develop. Despite the fact that CES scholars point to the heavy overburden of indentifying communities, gaining access, networking with members, developing consensus and crafting a sustainable project that must be accomplished before the traditional starting points of funding, theory, and methodology can even be reached.

But the more difficult problems reside in the outcomes and product of the research as well as their evaluation. The dual promise of a contribution to knowledge and demonstrable outcomes in the community is both a difficult standard to meet and an evaluation nightmare. Evaluation is a problem in even active departments. A respondent from one such department noted: “I think a lot of people are doing community engaged scholarship in the department so it is valued, but then we have this disconnect between [its importance and its evaluation] and how to say, what’s your citation count? So that’s the challenge for the department, [and] I think it’s the bigger challenge for community engaged scholarship.” Time and again faculty respondents expressed a sense of hopelessness in changing the regulatory climate to open up the time and resources required to conduct engaged scholarship. And they note as long as the hegemony of the traditionals control both the publication outlets and the ratings of those publications, it will remain its biggest challenge.

CES at the Margins

From an organizational standpoint, it’s pretty clear that within many departments CES operates at the margins of the institution. Like community outreach by corporations, it is seen as

an important and even necessary activity but not part of the center, not part of the revenue stream. A president of this institution has reputedly said that “The University is not the Red Cross.” I would agree and I would add that engaged scholarship is not charity. What community-engaged scholarship needs is a good business plan. Developing this plan faces its own difficulties. To begin with, there are a number of “natural” impediments to the reciprocal engagement between the University and the community, and they stand on both sides of this relationship. Communities have to see the University as accessible and faculty and graduate students need to see engagement as part of their overall mission. Further, as we have seen, there is not clear consensus on what community-engaged scholarship actually is: We can, however, see some patterns that could be arranged on a continuum anchored on one end by traditional shall we say basic or laboratory research and by the strong CES program described in the Declaration on the other.

Perhaps the first marker along this continuum would be in situ studies, which are traditional research conducted on a community population with no interaction or participation by community members except as respondents in the study. The study design, funding and conclusions are all reached independently of the community itself. Another point along this continuum might be local consultancies where academic experts work with community based institutions and organizations on common problems of interest. This form is Boyer’s original model and typically does not involve “discovery” or publication except perhaps as a case study.

As we near the Declaration’s endpoint, research work would start with the development of a durable relationship with community members. That relationship would at least participate and better yet guide the constitution of theory as well as the design and execution of the research. The conclusions would have both immediate consequences and generalizable implications. Funding would be a community responsibility. I believe this to be the form that is true to CES

and institutionally viable. But there are points beyond this one where one leaves the comfort of the organized community or institution and ventures into community organizing itself, raising interesting and important questions about the nature of research and of community.

Having drawn this continuum, let me unequivocally say that I think that all the points along it—even the most traditional and most radical—are important activities; they do represent different mixtures of community engagement, research, and collaboration, however. The question for me is how do we get to the sweet spot where we have consequential outcomes and discovery in a collaborative effort that returns not only good will to the university but increases its national standing.

Solutions in the Departments

In the end I think the place we achieve this confluence of good outcomes is in the many departments of this University. No other group knows better the negotiations across resources that have to be conducted in order that community-engaged scholarship can become a regularized activity. I believe the way departments can move to this achievement is to create a symbol visible to the community and to itself of their commitment to the effort by institutionalizing this commitment in a departmental center of community engagement.

Every department has particular expertise, skills, and knowledge that can be leveraged by community interests into positive outcomes. Micro-economics has demonstrated that it does not take a large investment to produce significant results when the community itself is the driving force. Departmental centers do not require money, do not collect money, do not disburse money. Their work is in the creation of the durable linkages between departmental members and the members of the multiple communities of this state and to provide the site for what will be a continuing discussion of what engaged research entails and requires.

When organizations are challenged, as we most certainly are in this economic climate, the worst thing they can do is to turn insular and to work even harder at the practices that produced the challenge in the first place. State funding represents 11 percent of our total budget but 65 percent of our core activity according to Paul Brinkman. No one ever made money second guessing the state legislature, but would strengthened community ties make a difference? I started with Boyer (1990). Let me end with Boyer (1996): Two months before his death and five years after he advanced the discussion about the consequences of our efforts, he declared:

America's colleges and universities are now suffering from a decline in public confidence and a nagging feeling that they are no longer at the vital center of the nation's work. . . . Still, our outstanding universities and colleges remain, in my opinion, among the greatest sources of hope for intellectual and civic progress in this country. I'm convinced that for this hope to be fulfilled, the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems and must reaffirm its historic commitment to . . . the *scholarship of engagement*. (p. 19)

References

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