ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP: HISTORY AND PRESENT DILEMMAS

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Introduction

This paper explores the historical roots of engaged scholarship in the social sciences, the current state of engaged scholarship in the academy, and the opportunities and challenges for greater public engagement in the near term. "Engaged scholarship" has been broadly defined as the collaboration of academics with practitioners or members of the public in the production of scientific knowledge to promote social progress. In the United States, such scholarly engagement has a long and distinguished pedigree, evolving over time and finding influential advocates among faculty, administrators, government actors, grant-makers, and the public itself. The practice gained early traction with the land grant movements of the 1860s, when the Morrill Act helped diversify and enlarge access to higher education. Scholarly engagement reemerged at the time of the New Deal and World War II, but dramatically expanded during the Civil Rights Era and the Vietnam War (Gordon da Cruz 2018), events which brought many activists into graduate programs in the social sciences. Financial and professional support for scholarly engagement has become institutionalized since the 1980s with new associations, centers, networks, and journals dedicated to promoting the practice. One key focal point for such activities, Campus Compact, was founded in 1985 with a mission to deepen universities' "ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility." Thereafter, multi-institutional and cross-disciplinary efforts were initiated by several universities to increase their commitment to community service and "service learning" (Furco 1996).

Recent generations have also taken up the call. A 1999 report by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities urged higher education to expand and deepen its interactions with the public, and, in response, a new wave of community engagement and applied research initiatives launched across the United States. Numerous universities developed programs to address the social, economic, and political needs of their communities and stakeholders, to contribute to the development of public policy, and to meet new requirements of grantmaking entities. The 2012 *Call to Action* from the U.S. Department of Education pushed for higher education to "expand and transform their approach…to democratic engagement, rather than engage at tinkering at the margins." The past 20 years have seen faculty members and researchers work closely with practitioners, the public, and others with firsthand knowledge of social issues, often with a goal of advancing scholarship through mutually constructive processes of knowledge creation.

Effective scholarly engagement currently faces serious challenges, both on the part of scholars and on the part of the publics they seek to interact with. Academics face constraints that inhibit partnerships outside the academy: resources, such as time and money, are scarce; incentive structures, such as tenure reviews and publishing opportunities, are misaligned. Engaged scholars continue to face a stigma that creation of knowledge through civic collaboration is not as rigorous as other forms of academic work. And despite evidence that younger scholars are increasingly interested in producing work through engagement (Eatman 2015), graduate students find it difficult to identify faculty members who are doing such work and to secure institutional support and resources.

Other challenges are inherent to working with practitioners in the community. Engaged scholarship requires addressing issues of ethics, best practices, objectivity, and collaboration, with the aim of producing knowledge in a context where researchers and practitioners are partners.

What is Engaged Scholarship?

As engaged scholarship has expanded in scope over the 20th and 21st centuries, ideas about scholarly engagement—its appropriateness, ethics, and purpose—have also evolved.

Engaged scholarship is often defined by the reciprocal nature of connection and commitment in the production of social-scientific knowledge (Bender 1988). Through participation, external partners—the public, civil society groups, activists, and practitioners, among others—are actively involved as joint partners in the execution of scholarly work. Cox (2000) emphasizes that engagement can occur at any point in the research process, but importance should always be placed on "meaningful collaboration between higher education and community partners." Ehlrich (2000) refers to engagement as a "means of working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing a combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes."

In 2005, Campus Compact convened 23 scholars from universities considered "advanced" in civic work to create a joint statement about how to promote scholarly engagement in communities. The group endorsed a statement of engaged scholarship as "research in any field that partners university scholarly resources with those in the public and private sectors to enrich knowledge address and help solve critical societal issues, and contribute to the public good" (Stanton 2008). Jaeger et al. (2014) define it as "the collaborative generation, refinement, conservation, and exchange of mutually beneficial and societally relevant knowledge that is communicated to and validated by peers in academy and the community" (p. 3). Definitions of engaged scholarship also often emphasize rigor and methodological standards.

Balancing rigor while benefiting practitioners, and without doing harm to the community in the process, is a key challenge for researchers. Scholarly engagement can be harmful if epistemological predispositions, traditional power structures, and unequal partnerships are not accounted for. Academics may bring their own personal, professional, and institutional biases to the table when they engage in collaborative research. Creating partnerships without taking these factors into account can be counterproductive for community partners, particularly those from underserved or under-resourced backgrounds. Some scholars have made efforts to counteract such potential biases. To take an example from the service learning literature, advocates of a "critical" approach argue that traditional community engagement is not enough—students should work toward social justice explicitly (Mitchell 2008). This type of engagement addresses the inequalities and systems of power ingrained in society and seeks to deconstruct them by emphasizing the consequences of research. The idea is that scholars need to understand that engagement can perpetuate and even exacerbate systems of power that oppress communities of color, women, and others facing social and economic inequities (Mitchell 2008).

On the one hand, engaged scholarship—done well—can be mutually beneficial from ethical and practical standpoints for the parties involved. Collaboration can serve the needs of the community and address consequential public issues (Gordon da Cruz 2018) while simultaneously improving scholarship—collaborative research benefits from the input of activists on the ground who have more familiarity with key problems than do researchers (Calhoun 2008). By working with communities to conduct research, scholars can uncover new research questions, find richer data sources, and test hypotheses from a better empirical footing. Engagement can dramatically widen the conventional fields of research, exploring underserved but nonetheless scientifically relevant domains. Engaged scholars from W.E.B. Du Bois to Ernesto Galarza have "contibut[ed] to academic research, and engag[ed] diverse publics often ignored by the rest of academia" (Sanchez 2002, pg. 17).

Purpose of Engagement

In her 2004 presidential address, Theda Skocpol, the first woman leader of the American Political Science Association, envisioned the future of the discipline as one where "our successors can look back and say that we built well on earlier foundations, opening the way for still further growth and intellectual and practical engagement." That same year, the American Sociological Association (ASA) focused its annual conference theme on public scholarship. President Michael Burawoy wrote a series of essays and made dozens of public statements about its importance. In his presidential address, Burawoy stated "we have spent a century building professional knowledge, translating common sense into science, so that now, we are more than ready

to embark on a systematic back-translation, taking knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles, and thus regenerating sociology's moral fiber."

Engaged scholarship is often perceived as a solution to the disconnect between academics and the public, as well as a way for academics to adapt to a changing society, where institutional and social needs require innovative research. Some describe community engagement as a necessary action by universities to preserve civic and democratic engagement (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement). As a result, in the last two decades at least, a broad shift has occurred: scholars are expanding their communication with public audiences, working for the public good, and generating knowledge with public participation. In 2012, the Task Force for Higher Education argued that "higher education can serve…as one of the defining sites for practicing democratic and civic responsibilities" (pg. 2).

What do scholars themselves think is the purpose of engagement? Opinion research shows that engaged scholars view it as "qualitatively different from other key roles" (pg. 122), but that understanding of what engagement means is mixed (Kasworm and Abdrahim 2014), not only across, but within disciplines (Haft 2015). Kasworm and Abdrahim (2014) found that experiences were conditioned on individuals' own culture, position, and past. These findings are important for understanding how collaborative research works—and should work—to benefit collaborators in an ethical, equal, and co-productive way. Woods (2001) argues that for engagement to be successful, researchers must be "committed to the cause."

The Current State of Researcher-Practitioner Collaboration

The proliferation of opportunities for scholars to engage with their communities—as well as associations, journals, task forces, conferences, and other forums where such collaboration is discussed, assessed, and even celebrated—puts us at a moment where crucial questions about engagement should be asked:

- What are the epistemological biases that academics bring to any engaged research setting?
- How are those biases affecting the way research is conducted and the extent to which practitioners are equal partners in the research process? Are relationships truly reciprocal and is knowledge truly co-created?
- In this engagement, to what extent are the needs of practitioners and community partners being served? Are researchers flexible in their methodologies and research designs, or are institutionalized biases transferring to this new setting?
- Engagement is primarily framed as a challenge to mainstream academic scholarship. What are the implications of this framing? How else can it be framed to be more productive?

Thinking about engaged scholarship in the 21st century, Hartley (2009) argues that American universities are at a crossroads, and must decide whether to "seek broad-based legitimacy within the academy by aligning the efforts with disciplinary norms," or to "challenge the status quo and attempt to transform higher education and align its efforts with the pressing needs of America's democracy" (p. 11; quoted in Jaeger et al. 2014). The answer to this question may not be clear cut—even

the framing of this assumes that scholarly engagement is necessarily a controversial act. Benson et al. (2017) call for an "*intellectual project*" that would "construct a comprehensive, democratic, practical-theoretical approach" to scholarly engagement (Glass 2018, pg. 49). Developing such models requires a better understanding of:

- Capacity for engagement given current power structures in society.
- The historical roles for women and people of color when it comes to scholarly engagement, given that social sciences have historically been dominated in both left- and right-wing spheres by white men.
- The most effective models of engagement to establish trust and build productive relationships with community partners, given current power and incentive structures.
- How to create synergies between "professionalism" and "engagement"—in other words, how to realign incentives so that scholars can make democratic collaboration a more integrated part of their job as a scholar.

How can these goals be achieved while creating reciprocal relationships with practitioners? How can knowledge be co-produced without harming the community and/or reinforcing unequal structures of power? Strand et al. (2003) propose a model of community-based research that is community-, rather than campus-driven, one that "democratizes the creation and dissemination of knowledge … and seeks to achieve positive social change" (pg. 5). The key components of the model are collaboration, where community members work with scholars at *every* stage of the research; democratization of knowledge ("validating multiple sources" and the "use of

multiple methods of discovery and dissemination"); and an orientation toward the goal of social change and justice (Strand et al. 2003, pg. 6).

Strand's model of engagement implies that everyone at the table is an equal partner in the research process. Researchers are not just "outside experts;" they are establishing meaningful and long-lasting relationships with practitioners and the community. Practitioners can learn new skills from the research process, which they can take back to their organizations to build new capacities. Local knowledge is integrated and valued equally with scholarly knowledge. Once research is produced, it is communicated in a way that is useful and comprehensible for stakeholders. Ultimately, research through this approach is higher quality because it accounts for multiple perspectives, languages, and understandings, and is more accessible to the community. Finally, the social change component emphasizes research designed in the interest of community needs and priorities, rather than to advance knowledge solely in a discipline.

Current Limits of Scholarly Engagement

While universities have ostensibly been committed to scholarly engagement historically, there are significant practical and institutional barriers, including the incentive structure of the recruitment, promotion, and tenure processes, which narrowly favor publications in refereed journals over wider conceptions of scholarly activities (Jaeger et al. 2012). A dramatic decline in full-time professorships and increase in part-time faculty has exacerbated the problem (Jaeger et al. 2014). Faculty interested in scholarly engagement must typically figure out, on their own, how to build community partnerships and to manage time, resources, and engagement with little guidance and few standard operating procedures (Jaeger et al. 2014). These factors, among others, disincentivize faculty from conducting community-engaged research.

These circumstances spill over to graduate students' decision-making on their own research. Jaeger et al. (2014) showed that among 35,000 dissertations written at 90 institutions between 2001 and 2011, a mere 129 were classified as engaged scholarship.[1] Graduate students who may be interested in engagement typically lack resources themselves and may find it difficult to identify faculty advisors who are engaged scholars.

Yet, demand among graduate students to engage with the community appears high. In 2004, Golde and Dore conducted a study of graduate students from a variety institutions and disciplines, finding that 52 percent wanted to serve the community. Sixty-one percent were interested in interdisciplinary research, which has been shown to benefit collaborative efforts by pushing disciplinary boundaries and bringing a variety of "theoretical, analytical, and policy frameworks" to the table (Lambert-Pennington et al. 2011).

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[1] The authors found that West Coast institutions published twice as many dissertations classified as community-engaged; the Midwest produced the second most, followed by the East Coast. The field of Education produced the most of these dissertations, followed by public health, anthropology/sociology/psychology, and public administration/policy/planning. A quarter of these dissertations were conducted using case study methodologies, a quarter using quantitative and mixed methods, a fifth using ethnography, and 16 percent using participatory research. Over the 2001 to 2011 period, the number of community-engaged dissertations spiked after 2007.

The study of graduate students showed that virtually none was trained in their programs for engaged research (Jaeger et al. 2014). Graduate students interested in such scholarship are more likely to pursue non-academic careers. Unfortunately, these non-academic positions often require skills that students were not taught in graduate school. At a practical level, community engagement offers an opportunity for graduate students to become proficient in producing knowledge more broadly with leaders in sectors outside of the academy (Jaeger et al. 2014; Blee et al. 2008; Day et al. 2012). At a normative level, engaged scholarship could develop a new generation of researchers who are interested in expanding the production of knowledge in a way that improves scientific rigor while simultaneously meeting the needs of the public and new demands of universities and grant-makers (Jaeger et al. 2014).

How Can Collaboration Improve?

The Center on Democracy and Organizing (CDO) seeks to strengthen researcher-practitioner collaboration by providing accessible information on best practices, facilitating partnerships, and supporting research on how to improve engaged scholarship practices. CDO offers three recommendations as a starting point for change:

1) *Documenting engagement:* Processes, practices, lessons, successes, and failures. Through this iterative process we can begin to understand better how the scholarship of engagement works most productively, and how we can better shape engagement in the future.

2) *Establishing a foundation for engagement:* Establishing new institutions and changing incentive structures will both be critical for shifting the culture of the academy toward more engaged scholarship.[2] Lessons can be drawn by looking across disciplines. Jaeger et al. (2014) identify that graduate students in the fields of education and public health are relatively more engaged than other disciplines. How are these disciplines fostering such engagement and how can social science, humanities, and other disciplines learn from these efforts? One step in this direction is to establish a curriculum of engagement for social science graduate students. Of course, professional schools—public policy, public health, public administration, and others—are built around such models. However, it is important for the social sciences to create of cohort of young scholars who are committed to this type of work. And further, to teach them the necessary skills to establish and sustain relationships with practitioners. This may precipitate internal change within the academy.

3) *Creating a common intellectual framework:* Building a common set of language, principles, and guidelines for engaged work, based on successes and reciprocity. This may lead to more equal partnerships, develop mutual understanding and respect, and help produce knowledge that is co-created.[3]

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[2] For example, the Engagement Scholarship Consortium, Scholar Strategy Network, Campus Compact, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and others, seek to improve the understanding of community engagement among graduate students.

[3] There are specific examples of engaged scholarship across several universities that have implemented

programs that incorporate elements from each of these three recommendations. In *Transforming Cities and Minds through the Scholarship of Engagement*, Lorlene Hoyt discusses how important it is to "cultivat[e] deep, sustained civic cooperation and collaboration" across "rooted institutions" (2013), those that provide jobs and understand the local milieu. In this context,

4) Bridging the community between scholars and practitioners: Scholars should think creatively to find new ways to work with practitioners. CDO, for example, is launching a summer institute that pairs practitioners with scholars in an interactive training on collaboration. Successful pairs will be able to jointly apply for a grant to start a new project. These types of opportunities are just one way the academy can help create mutual respect between scholars and practitioners, develop longer-lasting partnerships, and improve the value and rigor of research.

How Can We Think About Scholarly Engagement Moving Forward?

How can scholars ethically, effectively, and productively collaborate with practitioners in a way that each participant is an equal partner in the research process? How can this be addressed in the social movement context in particular? Since World War II, major social changes in the United States have occurred through landmark legislation on voting rights and civil rights, through social movements that changed public attitudes, through generational replacement, and through higher quality and more inclusive education systems, among other mechanisms. And significant progress was no doubt achieved. But the familiar terrain of American political reform and social progress seems to have shifted in the past decade or more. In particular, a number of significant social, economic, political, and technological transformations may have rendered the traditional mechanisms of social reform less effective or even obsolete, among them: the growing concentration of wealth; resurgent nativism, anti-Semitism, and racism; media consolidation, the rise of social media, and the spread of propaganda and hate speech; and inflexible political institutions and growing corruption. We currently lack a good understanding of what forms of scholarly engagement will work in this new era, if any. Scholars must continue to reflect critically on their roles in public life and on the purpose and methods of engaged scholarship, with the aim of devising new and more effective means of contributing to the improvement of society.

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the book is an edited volume from students of MIT's Community Innovator's Lab, which established an effort between graduate students and the community to not only identify, but solve, local urban planning issues. Hoyt's experience led her to argue that a "new epistemology" is needed for change—both in graduate education and for democratic societies (Hartley 2015).

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