

Why Universities Should Want to Do Work that Engages Communities and Practitioners and that is Relevant to Policy

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Summary

This section of the guide is based on the belief that universities need to develop sustainable relationships with communities that address the important needs of the communities. Said differently, universities are often viewed as economic assets, hiring people and contributing to local economies. But we believe that the more important role of universities is as engaged research and educational partners addressing the challenges facing communities and helping to improve community life. We argue here and illustrate through examples from our partner institutions that community-university relationships need to be systematic, driven institutionally, meaningful, and intentional, and that they need to represent a long-term, sustainable commitment to partnership. We also argue that to produce research that benefits society, universities must adopt institution-wide philosophy that embraces the contemporary approach to public engagement that we describe. Engaged research is important, for it can be the face of the research university in the community, and can help those outside universities understand better the importance of supporting and sustaining their universities.

[M]ost universities continue to do their least impressive work on the very subjects where society's need for greater knowledge and better education is most acute (Bok, 1990).

The quote above from Derek Bok articulates both the important role of research in addressing and helping to ameliorate society's problems and challenges as well as its inadequate performance to date. This position was also stated earlier by Lewin (1946) in his articulation of action research, and not surprisingly has been repeated by other academics as well. Given all the time that has passed, why does it seem like there has been so little progress, and that few problems and challenges have been solved by academic research? From one perspective, Bok's statement should not be surprising, for the topics and issues about which society's need are greatest are complex, multifaceted, value-laden, and thus not easily addressed. Otherwise, they would be solved readily once identified. A second perspective was articulated best by Berliner (2002), who called educational research—but could have been talking about community engaged research—the “hardest science of all.” It faces local conditions and contextual factors that limit generalizations and theory building, interactions of treatments with era and cultural contexts in which they occur, and the challenge of working with people,

hardly passive recipients of knowledge, and, to paraphrase Michelle Fine (Fine, personal correspondence, January, 2015), possessing their own imaginations, identities, perspectives, and souls.

From yet another perspective, insufficient attention has been devoted to addressing issues of greatest importance for society by a post-secondary education system focused on basic research, theoretical advances, and communication among scientists. The bent of its research toward seeking generalizable laws and principles makes understanding of dynamics of a single setting seem much less important, for such an approach is less focused on creation of generalizable information. Much of the research done by social and behavioral scientists ignores or at best speaks indirectly to the most challenging and impactful issues of the day because their solution is not provided by a single theoretical or disciplinary perspective.

Today, however, the focus and goals of research may be changing, for external pressures and accountability needs are increasing the focus of universities and others on research addressing important societal issues. Further, as will be explained in more detail later in this overview, applied and problem focused work has taken on a somewhat different, more positive identity as *translational research*, led by disciplines like Public Health. Nevertheless, in the words of Schon (1995), such research is still the swamp, messy, less controllable, less predictable, and often frustrating. Researchers directing their energies toward challenging issues frequently experience lack of control and incomplete understanding of the research settings and their dynamics, for they are outsiders to those settings. They need partners familiar with the settings and their characteristics and idiosyncrasies. They also have to recognize that the participants in the research process, unlike typical college student participants in some social science research, are looking for particular outcomes for themselves and their communities, and perfectly willing to challenge researchers. Finally, there are many possible reasons that the research they are doing may not warrant publication, e.g., it may be specific to the setting and circumstances within the setting.

So is our goal to “admire the problem,” to bemoan the complex challenges and justify slow progress? That may be one academic way, but it is not our way. What we believe and the primary thrust of this component of our First in the World project is that *limits on the progress of researchers is due in part to universities as institutions having cultures that focus on the production of research and not on societal impact of that research. The academic culture of research universities in particular is not conducive to building sustainable community partnerships in ways that honor and incorporate the expertise and knowledge that resides outside of the academy.* “Town and Gown” can have many operationalizations, but often this notion focuses on the neighborliness of the university in regards to how well it fits into and interacts with its surrounding communities. The strength of the town-gown relationship tends to emphasize non-academic issues such as parking issues, the behavior of students, university sports events, and the university’s contribution to the local economy. However, broader and deeper campus-community partnerships are required to connect the academic goals of universities with those of the broader society. Too rarely have these included

sustainable partnerships in which both parties are strongly and consistently invested in collaboratively addressing problems together for the long term.

We also believe that effective engagement of universities with communities for teaching and service/outreach as well as research requires deep, mutually beneficial partnerships that have developed trust, genuine commitment, and collective gain. Developing such partnerships is hard work, requires continuity across changing university administrations and community personnel, and includes commitments to work that might not be “cutting edge research,” namely, research that provides substantial advancement to theory. It demands dedication to addressing a changing set of problems and challenges that confront society. On the part of a university, it has to be *mission* work so central that it does not rely on champions to track and sustain it.

If asked about commitments to contributions to the public good, many university administrators are likely to say that they already are engaged with communities and are contributing to serving the public good. They are often quick to point to places within their institution that have public service missions (like Extension Services, university-run Health Clinics, or lab schools) and relatively small units that the institutions have created or supported for this purpose.. Unfortunately, identifying specific units that meet a particular need is far different from a more central and institution-wide commitment to work collaboratively to address many of the array of issues challenging today’s communities. Furthermore, it is atypical for the key central administrators (presidents, chancellors, provosts) to be the ones advancing and sustaining partnerships at a level of depth and intensity that represents a major, sustainable institutional commitment. We are arguing, however, that in order for institutions to make a difference *as an institution* rather than as a place housing committed individual researchers or small units, there needs to be a strong philosophical commitment to engagement and long-term partnerships, and a developed infrastructure that can embed the work in academia and tie together the different initiatives in which universities partner with communities. Therefore, in this section of our engagement “guide” *we focus on the importance of putting in place processes that create trust and mutual commitment between communities and universities*, and discuss ways that we have seen those being developed insofar as they currently exist.

As one looks across comprehensive research universities, there are many different settings where research involves practitioners, including for example studies in education with educators, parents and families, and students; in health care with service providers and patients; in public policy with government officials and service providers; and in other fields including marketing and business, law, social welfare, and public affairs. Professional schools are strongly connected to their professions and communities through residencies, practicum experiences, internships, field placements, and so forth. Imagine how much easier those experiences are when underlying them there are in place agreements that define the partnerships and undergird any and all programs in communities.

When we talk about research, faculty and staff doing engaged research need to

share control, work in settings where many other things are occurring concurrently with any research, and work with partners who usually are simultaneously working toward other goals in addition to those of the research. Often so many things are changing that it is difficult to attribute a particular finding uniquely to a specific intervention or approach. More importantly for developing and sustaining partnership work, when “more important” work central to the missions of our partners emerges, partners may drop everything else and ignore what is most important to researchers. If, however, during partnership development the parties identified areas for partnership that are of central importance to both university and community partners, such instances should be far less frequent. We don’t say this ignoring the importance of differing ways of working that might be found, but to focus on one important aspect of partnerships that can be controlled provided trust underlies the partnership development

Historical Roots of Engaged Research

“without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactic, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, ... in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862

Principles connecting the work of universities with the needs of society are nothing new. Harvard University, the first institution of higher learning in the United States was established in 1636 to prepare a learned clergy that would advance the religious values of the times. During the Civil War, the **Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862** created public research universities whose purpose was to address evolving societal needs of that era in areas of agriculture and the mechanic arts, consistent with the growing agrarian society of the time. The **land grant mission** sought to engage universities more fully with their communities by putting in place mechanisms that encouraged researchers to think about how their research might more directly meet the needs of the broader society. It formalized a unique role for land grant universities as a partner with the state in generating, applying, and teaching about new knowledge and discoveries. The act promoted integration of knowledge generation, teaching, and application. While initially relegated primarily to “agricultural” and “mechanical” arts and sciences, the role broadened over time to include the generation of new knowledge and discoveries in the arts, sciences and humanities that has profoundly shaped and influenced the U.S. future on every level.

With rise of the German ideal for universities in the 1900s, which emphasized the importance of basic research, many U.S. public land-grant research universities began to shift their focus toward emphasizing research to advance the disciplines rather than to address societal needs. Later in the 20th century, the pendulum between research designed to advance disciplines and research designed to address societal challenges swung back some as higher education institutions with missions dedicated to urban areas and issues were created (e.g., University of Illinois, Chicago). By the end of the 20th Century, there was a clarion call for institutions of higher education, especially research universities, to return focus to their founding mission statements, most of

which promote the production of research for the betterment of society. It was at this time that the ideal of “engaged scholarship” took hold, building off of the Ernest Boyer’s work in rearticulating the goals and purposes of scholarship.

Boyer argued that work like that described in this section is integral to the future of research universities. In *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), he posed questions about how knowledge can responsibly be applied to consequential problems, and whether social problems can themselves provide an agenda for scholarly work. His questions are key, for they firmly anchor engaged work to the core missions of land grant and other research universities. Linkages come through the four different scholarships identified by Boyer—*discovery, integration, engagement, and teaching*. And they touch the three key missions of land grant and other research universities: research, teaching, and outreach/public service. Engaged research of universities includes basic (discovery) research conducted in field settings, applied inter-disciplinary research (integration—synthesis of knowledge, and engagement—taking knowledge outside the academy) translating theory to practice, and problem-driven research applying academic tools and approaches to better understand complex social issues. Within the university, the research informs training experiences for graduate and professional students, provides research and service learning experiences for undergraduates, and links to work of outreach professionals in numerous areas like health care, nutrition, youth and family development, education, community and economic development, and gardening/farming. Beyond the university, knowledge is shared with the community, allowing them to use or apply it.

In addition to moving beyond the traditional land grant disciplines to include social sciences and all other disciplines, today’s engaged work differs in that it is being done during an **urban age** developing within a global society. Society in the U.S. and the world has become increasingly metropolitan/urban, with a substantial majority of the population now living in urban areas. Challenges of an urban age (disparities in educational outcomes, crime rates, employment, access to and quality of health care, crowding, etc.) have become prominent and are closely tied to economic success. A major change produced by the urban age is in the nature of the communities in which the work is done. In smaller rural communities of the past, disadvantaged populations were relatively small and often interspersed among more affluent others, making communities socioeconomically diverse. In contrast, in larger metropolitan areas today, along with larger populations there is substantial stratification, and many urban communities or parts of communities are largely composed of economically and socially disadvantaged populations whose challenges go largely unnoticed by others sharing the metropolitan area but not the specific community. The concentration of poverty and disadvantage changes somewhat the nature of the work, for many of today’s neighborhoods and communities struggle to meet the needs of their population.[Citation needed] They confront researchers with entire communities facing multiple challenges, markedly changing the scope of challenges. Universities in such circumstances are not just “value adders,” but core providers of knowledge and also services through their research and outreach.[citation needed] Along with the larger and complex challenges come great opportunities for researchers interested in conducting research to produce

societal benefits.

Despite substantial research activity, research programs still struggle with ameliorating or producing substantial sustained impact on the growing array of issues facing today's society. Limits of impacts underscore the complexity of the challenges faced as well as the need for new approaches that change the scale, coherence, and even fundamental assumptions guiding how the challenges are addressed. Our experiences suggest to us that university involvement addressing critical issues is key, but also that universities are unable to create changes of sufficient magnitude without engaging external partners and building community capacity. A major role of universities is to convene stakeholders and work to create broad partnerships that go deep into communities while engaging major governmental and non-governmental organizations (see, for example, Kania & Kramer, 2011). Work needs to be sustained rather than episodic, and institutional rather than investigator driven. Such changes are beginning to occur, and we believe that future generations of social and behavioral science researchers will need to have skills and understandings that enable them to conduct translational research in partnership with practitioners and policy-makers as well as with other researchers. We explain next why it is important today and then focus on issues to consider when doing such work.

Importance of Collaborative Engaged Research

Collaborative research is important both to post-secondary institutions and to the research community. For post-secondary institutions, Harkavy and Puckett (1994) suggest that there are many arguments supporting university research engagement, including self-interest (e.g., personal safety), costs of being withdrawn from the community, advancement of knowledge, teaching, and human welfare, as well as promoting civic consciousness and engagement. Support for urban engaged research has come from major associations of university presidents, for example, through the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) and its Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU). Many university presidents have spoken individually in support of engaged research. For example, former Syracuse University President (and social psychologist) Nancy Cantor (2007) pointed to the importance of reasserting the public benefits of higher education, of reconnecting with the American people, and of leaving the "ivory tower" to engage in public scholarship with community partners.

Engaging in long-term research collaborations with partners is important in advancing research knowledge for a number of reasons:

- Such research goes beyond the college student subject population that has been so prominently a part of some social science research, and also may get beyond the criticism that too much research is based on samples that are WEIRD (White, Educated from nations that are Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic, see, e.g., Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) through inclusion of immigrant and economically struggling samples. Through collaboration, researchers have better access to diverse research participants who are more representative of broader

society, which should increase generalizability of findings.

- It is responsive to today's most important issues, counteracting criticism that universities have been disinterested and therefore deficient in contributing to the betterment of society.
- The work develops collaboration as a **mutually beneficial** arrangement that meets the needs of all the partners.
- Research in "real world settings" grounds theory in what is happening in the world outside academia. Research can look very different in natural settings, and ignorance about the setting may undermine even a well-conceived study.
- It is time for universities to acknowledge that research is no longer the exclusive domain of post-secondary education. Universities no longer are exclusive access points for scholarly information, for the Internet has made journal articles accessible from anywhere in the world. Today many highly skilled, credentialed, and qualified researchers are working outside academia in and with community partners and government agencies, not to mention the many "think tanks" that compete for research funding. Many of these researchers have substantial experience developing skills working with practitioners in applied settings that few of their university colleagues are able to match. They can provide a bridge between university researchers and practitioners. And, if universities choose not to engage communities, other researchers can bypass universities altogether in addressing the needs of communities.

Applied versus Translational Research

In *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Ernest Boyer asked questions about how knowledge can responsibly be applied to consequential problems, and whether or not social problems can themselves provide an agenda for scholarly work. These questions are critical ones to consider as universities struggle to address important issues and show impact. Perhaps legitimacy of engaged research as rigorous scholarship is improving. As mentioned earlier, what has in some instances dismissively been called applied research has received increased status through the use of different terminology to describe the work and its potential impacts. In particular, describing work focused on application of theories to practical problems as **translational** has provided greater credibility. Using the word translational provides a more positive perspective on engaged, relevant work within the academy, with status in many universities comparable to basic research. In health fields, phrases like "*bench to bedside to community*" have captured the importance of work that applies discoveries of basic laboratory research (referred to as bench science) immediately to improve patient wellbeing, living conditions, and general health. Such work has been reinforced by a focus on the relevance and impact of universities. Within the United States, for example, as was noted earlier, calls have gone out to make research universities more attentive to and directly engaged with the country's changing demographics and needs. In fall 2003, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Roadmap (Zerhouni, 2003) called for a

model that extended beyond the “ivory tower,” using a translational approach that applies basic research to provide real solutions for social problems facing today’s communities. In addition, the National Science Foundation (NSF) now asks directly about translational issues, explicitly requiring investigators to articulate broader impacts of their research. At times when all governmental expenditures are being closely scrutinized, being able to show that the work is supported by the community and to articulate the practical as well as conceptual benefits of research matters.

In concluding this section, it is important to note that community engagement offers opportunities to talk about the different array of approaches to research (basic, applied, experimental, exploratory, action, descriptive, participatory, translational, etc.) in new and connected ways. In some ways, one might think of the array of approaches as the “researcher toolbox,” and to note that if researchers ignore many of their available tools, we collectively lose the capacity to use the different tools and settings to create diverse ways of gathering information and creating what have been called “nomological nets (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955),” the use of different methodologies to more accurately define variables and to understand processes that are occurring. Convergence of multiple methods on common findings is the most powerful way of establishing knowledge. Engaged research can address basic theory and be experimental, for example, conducting randomized control trials in field settings. It also can address generalizability and applicability of existing theory (address external validity issues) in applied settings while also helping refine the conceptual underpinnings of the theory. It can be purely exploratory and descriptive, helping to construct knowledge and understanding that allows successful interventions as well as how different variables present in communities and other settings operate, and the importance of local settings and conditions for different variables. It can be action research, designed and driven by collective wisdom and methods of university and community partners, or can be uniquely driven by either university researchers or community partners. Essentially, the key point of this paragraph is that research can be community engaged in many different ways, and that the different ways each can move that research to addressing community needs and the common good. Not all university researchers have to be doing work or even caring about implications for community practices and public policies, but universities as entities need to be more engaged with their communities to solve community problems and address community issues. We have the capacity, but still are working out how to build and sustain structures consistent with our commitments to communities and public good.

Remainder of this section of the web site

In the remainder of this section, we share knowledge we have developed about working with communities and documents illustrative of the kinds of things that help to build partnerships (e.g., a vision for partnering, example Memoranda of Agreement or Understanding). We also include “lessons” we have learned from our partnership work, provide thoughts from both university people and community people about things researchers and partners should consider when developing partnerships, and illustrate partnerships by providing case studies from our various institutions on successful and

less successful partnerships.

References (incomplete)

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