

Scholarship and Mission in the 21st Century University: The Role of Engagement

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Fundamental shifts in modes of knowledge generation are challenging traditional conceptions of scholarly work and academic values on a global scale. Engaged scholarship, or engagement, refers to teaching and research activities that link academic institutions with external communities in mutually-beneficial knowledge exchange relationships. Engagement is being widely adopted by universities around the world as an expression of contemporary research methods and as a reinterpretation of the role of higher education in creating “public good.” Based on recent validations of engagement by international scholars, major research funding agencies and American systems of classification and accreditation, the author argues that engaged scholarship is an increasingly important factor influencing institutional diversity, scholarly prestige and higher education policy.

1. Introduction

Public policy for higher education can have a dramatic impact on academic values and scholarly priorities. For most of the last 30 years, public policy in the United States has portrayed higher education largely as a source of innovation and as individual opportunity through the conferral of degrees and credentials. These policies created an incentive for governments to invest research funding in fewer and fewer universities, and a political rationale to support reduced public subsidies for tertiary instruction in favor of revenue strategies that passed more costs directly to students. The dominance of the highly-selective research university as the primary model of academic prestige and success was greatly reinforced. Discipline-based peer review was widely adopted as the premiere criterion for funding and the leading indicator of intellectual quality, even at universities with relatively modest research capacity or mission. By the 1990s, universities were constrained by a monolithic and narrow image of academic quality, a decline in the diversity of institutional missions, stiff competition for full-paying students, and a great diminishment of public belief in the idea of higher education as a force for “public good”. There was, in other words, an institutional arms race for prestige and resources in pursuit of a narrowly defined target of excellence---the traditional research university. The idea that higher education has a responsibility through the deployment of its research and teaching capacity to contribute to the quality of community life, democratic capacity, and connecting knowledge to public needs and opportunities was largely lost.

When Ernest Boyer (1990) translated the constricting and rigid academic silos of research, teaching, and service into the more nuanced and interactive domains of discovery, teaching, engagement (Carnegie, 1997), and integration, he helped scholars and policymakers begin to see that higher education institutions cannot and must not adopt monolithic models of scholarship. The implications of this more generous view of the nature of scholarship for the establishment of institutional priorities, the roles and responsibilities of faculty, the design and intentions of the curriculum, and the nature of professional practice are still being explored. The Boyer model of scholarship, developed in large part through careful observation of the changing nature of American society and its knowledge needs, converges nicely with the changing nature of the

global economy and the behavior of multi-national companies. Observing the impacts of policy, technology and the global economy on academia and the corresponding impact of research on the economy, scholars around the world have launched an ongoing examination of fundamental changes in the nature of research, scholarly values, knowledge generation and dissemination, academic quality, and the role of higher education in society. Engaged scholarship, in particular, has emerged as a force for institutional diversification as each university considers how its intellectual assets should or should not be focused on the exploration of questions with public dimensions; questions that require collaborative knowledge relationships. Engaged scholarship is a specific conception of scholarly work that blends the intellectual assets and questions of the academy with the intellectual expertise and questions of the public. Engagement is a mode of teaching and learning, and a method of research; it is not a new view of the traditional notion of service. This approach to inquiry and knowledge generation is similar to contemporary trends in the role and impact of research and development in the private sector, as will be discussed herein.

This paper will place engaged scholarship within the context of recent literature and policy actions that suggest the traditional role of universities as society's primary generators and transmitters of knowledge is evolving. Now, academic institutions must become participants in a highly complex learning society where discovery, learning, and engagement are integrated activities that involve many sources of knowledge, generated in diverse settings by a variety of contributors. The paper will review the growing understanding and implementation of engagement in the U.S. and other countries, as well as changes in several key classification, accreditation, and research funding systems in the United States that are enhancing engagement's academic validity. Ultimately, the paper will argue that engaged research is destined to become an important measure of academic quality and prestige, to the degree that engagement is relevant to each university's mission and its constituencies. It can also be argued that engaged education is an equally important and growing trend within tertiary education as educators begin to reshape the traditional curriculum in response to demands for better prepared graduates who possess adaptive 21st century skills. Those skills include the capacity to improve professional practice by utilizing research-based approaches and the ability to handle unexpected and difficult problems. This movement is related to the theme of this paper but would require further development than space allows here. For our purposes, suffice it to say that engaged teaching and learning will be driven by the same patterns of economic and community development as the engaged research agenda and, in many cases, the two will soon integrate within the student experience. Thus, engaged teaching and learning as well as engaged research are both proving to be a force for institutional change and diversity.

2. Global Shifts in Research Paradigms

To date, much of the literature documenting shifts in the nature of knowledge production and research modes has come from Europe. As early as 1994, Michael Gibbons and several colleagues, began to reflect on new approaches to knowledge production and research, noting that while the traditional mode of research (called Mode I) continues, there is an emerging and increasingly important new research (Mode II) taking hold in higher education. Mode I is described as the traditional view of research: pure, disciplinary, homogeneous, expert-led, hierarchical, peer-reviewed, and almost exclusively university-based. Mode II is described as applied, problem-centered, "transdisciplinary," heterogeneous, hybrid, demand-driven, entrepreneurial, network-embedded, and not necessarily led by universities (Gibbons et al., 1994). Their argument is that Mode II is not replacing Mode I, but that Mode II will be increasingly important with continued growth of new, more flexible approaches to intellectual inquiry driven by the rapid diffusion of knowledge facilitated by the spread of information technology as a vehicle for knowledge exchange and a platform that supports new forms of collaboration.

Mode II research calls for "transdisciplinary" modes where knowledge is produced in the *context* of application rather than in the more controlled context of an academic discipline and its

paradigms. Transdisciplinarity is made necessary by the extensive social distribution of knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994). Disciplinary traditions, subject-driven academic programmatic hierarchies, and organizational boundaries inhibit the exploration of some intellectual problems. In part this is because technology has made knowledge, data, expertise and information so widely available that much research now can draw upon dynamic, interactive networks across different organizations, sectors, individuals, and even nations to address problems that were until now unresearchable. Research networks form, work and dissolve or transform as dimensions of a problem are solved. Results are diffused as they emerge; production and dissemination are often merged. As the question evolves, new practitioners, scholars, or experts may enter or exit the network, contributing to both new findings and further dissemination. Gibbons and his colleagues argue that traditional criteria will continue, but that elements of efficiency, application, and utility will become increasingly valued. In some research that involves transdisciplinary modes, validation of quality and impact of findings may arise from sectors and sources outside the exclusive realm of the disciplines. The value of knowledge is tested as it is discovered in the context of how well the network participants deem it to “work.” In the new engaged models, the knowledge generated by transdisciplinary, networked interactions is not always grounded in the disciplines, nor does it always need to be validated first by those disciplines.

Dominique Foray (2004), writing from the perspective of her work as principal administrator at the Centre for Education, Research and Innovation of the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), also sees major reforms in research paradigms that are driven by the rapid creation of new knowledge and the expansion of access to data across societies and economies. Foray proposes three models of knowledge production: Model 1 refers to research advanced primarily by universities or large industries; Model 2 introduces user needs into knowledge production; Model 3 adds what Foray calls “integrative knowledge” that requires collaboration across organizations and creates the capacity to solve increasingly complex problems through exchange and diffusion of expertise.

The scholarship of engagement resembles many of the characteristics of both Gibbon’s transdisciplinary scholarship and Foray’s Model 3 research. Engagement is necessarily collaborative and participatory, it draws on many sources of distributed knowledge across and beyond the university, and it relies on partnership relationships across diverse kinds of organizations, each of which offer key aspects of knowledge or expertise necessary to explore a research question. As such, engaged scholarship is shaped by multiple perspectives and deals with difficult, evolving questions that require long-term effort during which results may become known over time as particular pieces of the puzzle are solved.

These innovative approaches to the ways that research is designed, conducted, and disseminated are global in their implications and are well underway. They are also having an impact on the growing integration of teaching and research, calling us to view scholarly work as a whole enterprise and creating new traditions that will be associated with academic excellence.

3. Growing Validation of Engaged Scholarship

Accountability systems, policy environments, and reputational factors are already changing to accommodate new, collaborative models of knowledge generation and dissemination, including engaged research and teaching. As institutions pursue these new forms of scholarship, there is also a growing need for the documentation of quality across a wider range of institutional missions and distinctive interpretations of tertiary education.

For example, a task force of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) wrote in 2001 that “engagement is now a core value for the university....this implies strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world in at least four spheres: setting universities’ aims, purposes, and priorities; relating teaching and learning to the wider world; the

back-and-forth dialogue between researchers and practitioners; and taking on wider responsibilities as [institutional] neighbors and citizens.” (p.I). Later, a 3-year research and consultation process led by ACU resulted in the 2003 publication of *The Idea of Engagement: Universities in Society*, documenting the potential for engagement to create greater institutional diversification and research cooperation.

In the United States, an important illustration of changing academic cultures is the forthcoming revision to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, a leading typology of American colleges and universities that is widely used to describe institutional differences for the purposes of comparative research. Since its inception, the Carnegie classification scheme has been based primarily on measures of an institution’s research funding, its overall funding base and its degree mix. The production of doctorates has been placed at the highest rung within this typology not because advanced education is intrinsically more valuable than other forms of education and institutional mission but because research and doctoral education are considered the most prestigious. Although institutions were probably always more diverse than the original system acknowledged, the wide adoption of modes of “engaged teaching and research” and other reforms in teaching have dramatically enhanced the diversity of our higher education sector, and made it obvious that Carnegie’s limited set of descriptors was inadequate. Carnegie’s new approach will include more subcategories within categories of institutions, and multiple indicators of different types of research activity. In particular, a new elective scheme will measure engagement. The scheme will be voluntary during the pilot phase, with the intention of identifying a few measurable indicators that all institutions could collect and report. Moving from voluntary to universal reporting on engagement will depend almost entirely on the identification of clear and uniform indicators.

In addition, two large regional higher education accreditation organizations have introduced new accreditation standards that relate to engaged research and teaching. For example, the North Central Association Higher Learning Commission recently added “Criterion Five - Engagement and Service,” which reads: “As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways that both value.” (NCA, 2003:3.1-6.)

Major federal research funding agencies—such the National Science Foundation (NSF)—have adopted additional criteria for proposals that address aspects of collaborative methods and the public impact or potential application of research. NSF criteria now require that grant applications submitted for its consideration address the broader social impacts of the proposed research on public understanding; policy and/or practice; educational strategies; or broader participation in the research, among others (Ramaley, 2005). Recently, the U.S. National Institutes of Health launched a discussion about adding public community members to peer review panels. In January 2005, the National Academies hosted an international conference on “Advancing Knowledge and the Knowledge Economy” in Washington DC, hosted by NSF, two directorates of the European Commission, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and other organizations to explore the changing nature of knowledge production, and associated impacts on universities, industry, governments, and other research entities (Advancing Knowledge, 2005).

These and other breakthroughs confirm that the leading voices of the research world are beginning to explore these new perspectives on research paradigms and that our rhetoric and strategies are beginning to align with new research modalities. Some of America’s most prestigious universities now see engagement as an important and relevant dimension of their agenda. For example, Duke University has created a three-stage undergraduate research program called Research Service Learning (RSL), a series of research courses that teaches research methods by involving students in increasingly complex research collaborations with community partners. The program culminates with a full research study that meets both research standards of quality and the community partner’s research needs. The program is currently available in five

different subject areas, with more planned. A number of other research universities are adopting this model. Surely, as more undergraduates have these research experiences, these programs may become pipelines for future faculty who enter the academic profession committed to engaged modes of research practice. In the Midwest, the subcommittee on Engagement of the Big 10ⁱ Universities' Committee on Institutional Cooperation (2005) has written a report on Defining and Benchmarking Engagement that makes seven recommendations for helping institutions measure their commitment to engaged scholarship. The report suggests criteria for departments to use as they integrate engaged research and teaching into promotion and tenure reviews.

4. Institutional Diversity

By far, the early adopters of engaged scholarship around the world are the younger, smaller, more locally-oriented public and private universities with comprehensive programs, including some graduate degrees. Many of their students come from and tend to remain in the immediate geographic area; their graduates form future leadership of the communities they serve. These institutions suffered in the past from the pressure to imitate the research university model, knowing they lacked the policy support or financial resources to achieve that status fully; therefore, they struggled to create a balance of attention to teaching (closer to their true mission) with a balance of research that would support their mission. For many of these institutions, consideration of the role of engagement has clarified their academic identity and scholarly agenda and dramatically enhanced their quality and performance in both teaching and research. By focusing on the alignment of academic strengths with the critical issues of their surrounding communities, these universities developed a more specific teaching and research agenda that improved their performance as measured by student learning, retention, research productivity, and improved political and financial support from community leaders and public funders. The more specific topical and purposeful focus generated by an engagement and community involvement agenda tends to give these institutions a clear sense of mission, academic values and a vision for excellence that they previously lacked.

In general, the elite research university sector in the U.S. has only recently begun to recognize that the very nature and traditions of research and scholarship are evolving quickly and that modes of networked, collaborative research such as engaged scholarship will be an essential element of academic excellence in the 21st Century university. Recent changes in classification, ranking and recognition structures have generated tremendous interest on the part of the research universities, mostly just in the last year as these policy changes have been launched. Given the centrality of traditional scholarly values at these universities, engagement in their context will not likely ever be core to their performance, but nonetheless, engagement offers some important potential benefits to research universities, including:

- Developing the skills of transdisciplinary research; community-based research
- Making world-class research more visible locally
- Renewing a sense of “public purpose” to universities that have lost most of their public fundingⁱⁱ
- Involve their students, from all over the world, in the local community
- Enhance town and gown relationships
- Attract private donor support
- Attract and retain more first generation and diverse students

Beyond formal recognition and a desire for prestige, all universities are becoming interested in exploration of engagement based, in part, on the apparent potential for positive impacts on critical indicators of institutional success and internal performance. While few systematic studies have

been conducted to validate these observations, multiple examples of positive institutional effects suggest patterns such as the following examples of engagement's potential impacts:

- Clarifies institutional mission
- Creates a clear rationale for an intentional mix of attention to teaching and research
- Creates pride in a distinctive identity and purpose
- Enhances student learning, diversity of enrollment, and retention
- Can improve research funding through a more strategic focus on particular themes
- Generates community and economic development benefits
- Improves academic image and community relationships
- Increases private financial support

In many ways, the exploration (and conflict) over the relevance of engagement to higher education in general, or any institution specifically, has led to some greater clarity of the important differences among across universities and helped create more specific visions for the scholarly values and strengths that faculty and students embrace in teaching and research. Given greater levels of competition among education providers, reduced public funding for higher education, changes in the nature of research and knowledge production, and increased importance on effective teaching and successful student retention, one could argue that the exploration of engagement has suggested some new indicators of academic excellence. These new, fundamental traditions will look something like this

- Balanced attention to an intentional mix of multiple modes of scholarly roles across discovery, learning, and engagement.
- Research-based approaches to teaching and learning.
- Distinctive learning goals for students and intentional approaches to the learning environments that align with those goals.
- A strategic perspective that anticipates changes in societal knowledge needs.
- An intentional and evolving research agenda that engages many collaborating external partners as expert resources, and builds collective capacity for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research.
- Engagement in regional and local issues and conditions in keeping with specific institutional mission and strengths (Holland, 2004).

This extreme focus on intentionality and coherence means that as every institution explores its commitment to engagement, each institution's level of commitment will vary according to its history, mission, context, capacity, scholarly culture, and alignment of academic strengths with public issues and questions. Clearly, engagement is creating greater diversity among institutions because external collaborations require a deep level of attention to a specific agenda of shared work based on specific knowledge resources and capacities.

5. Conclusions and Policy Implications

The expanding role of technology and the importance of intellectual capital as a key asset in the economy is accelerating the development of new research modalities and making engagement a core element of academic excellence and prestige. The need to direct the intellectual assets of all tertiary institutions toward the amelioration of major public challenges and opportunities offers a way to renew the role of higher education as a force for nation building and improving quality of life. Perhaps of even greater significance is the powerful role of intellectual capital in the

development and success of all sectors of the world economy. Innovation is now the key to controlling world markets. Engagement represents an adaptive response of universities to these new realities. Traditional modes of research and their important corollaries, namely concepts of institutions as self-contained and primarily involved in the discovery and transmission of knowledge, will soon co-exist with new paradigms of knowledge generation and utilization. These new approaches will require engaged strategies, both to prepare graduates who can thrive and innovate in the context of the new global knowledge economy while also contributing to the quality of life in the communities where they live, and to ensure that each region and nation has the R&D capacity necessary to compete.

Recognizing these facts, many policymakers are working to create incentives to encourage and recognize engagement as an aspect of institutional missions and as a force for institutional diversification. Already, major research funders in the United States and Europe are exploring the implications of the new, more integrated and networked modes of knowledge generation and dissemination. Their discussions will surely lead to new policy initiatives meant to create incentives for universities to perform successfully in these new environments.

In addition, to recognize the diverse strengths of all academic institutions, new policy schemes must be developed to recognize and fund different modes of engagement that respond to different economic opportunities and emerging public issues and involve different types of knowledge outcomes. Beyond commercialization or technology transfer, engaged teaching and research through academic-community partnerships across different types of institutions can produce valuable direct impacts on local, regional and national economic, social, cultural, educational and health concerns. To reap this benefit, policy leaders should consider negotiating unique mission-based portfolios for different universities, accompanied by more specific accountability plans that align with that specific mission and scholarly agenda.

Attention to engagement can lead to greater institutional intentionality and consequently, more specific and focused agendas for research and teaching and more distinctive academic strengths. In a networked environment, these distinctive strengths can be combined in flexible and adaptive ways with the resources of community partners and national and regional industries to address complex and evolving problems and to promote innovative solutions to these pressing concerns. To succeed in serving the public good, be it at the local, national or international level, a higher education system must ensure that each institution has a clear pathway to success in keeping with their specific mission and the scope and scale of their intellectual assets. In this way, wasteful competition and duplication is reduced, and institutions are encouraged to generate diverse and specific portfolios and knowledge partnerships. Collaboration across different institutional types can encourage the sharing and leveraging of intellectual resources to serve a particular locale or a specific issue across regions. Engagement, as an integrative and collaborative mode of scholarly work, is proving effective in creating the institutional clarity and focus that collectively ensures a strong higher education system working in the public interest.

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ⁱ The Big 10 Conference comprises the large state research universities across the upper Midwest region of the U.S.; such as University of Michigan, University of Illinois, University of Wisconsin, etc. For the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, University of Chicago, a private research university was also a participant. Many of these universities have information on their community engagement work on their websites; see especially University of Minnesota and Pennsylvania State University.

ⁱⁱ This concept was stated by University of California System President Robert C. Dynes on June 10, 2005 at a system-wide symposium on community engagement. For a campus example, see University of California Los Angeles "UCLA in LA" program at <http://la.ucla.edu/>