Chapter 10
Community–Engaged Research:
Opportunities, Challenges, and the Necessity of Institutional Support

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ABSTRACT

Community-engaged research describes an approach towards research and a stance towards scholarship that arose in response to the criticism that institutions of higher education functioned only as ivory towers, disconnected from real-world problems. This chapter is intended to serve as an introduction to the concept of community-engaged research. Topics covered will include the definition of community-engaged research, the criteria for the evaluation of community-engaged research, inherent challenges associated with community-engaged research, and strategies that institutions of higher education can employ as a means of cultivating and sustaining community-engaged research among faculty.

INTRODUCTION

Community-engaged research describes an approach towards research that arose in response to the criticism that institutions of higher education functioned only as ivory towers, disconnected from real-world problems. This chapter will introduce the reader to the concept and mission of community-engaged research, and will focus, in particular, on the unique opportunities and challenges that this approach to scholarship presents. Scholarship that investigates this brand of research has shown that community-engaged researchers are unlikely to be successful unless they receive substantial support from their academic department and university. For this reason, this chapter will focus in depth on a variety of strategies that institutions of higher education can use to cultivate and sustain community-engaged scholarship among their faculty.

What Is Community-Engaged Scholarship?

The problems of our contemporary world cannot be solved with theoretical, discipline-specific knowledge alone. Instead, our world requires interdisciplinary, contextualized, and negotiated solutions:

Workable responses and solutions to today's problems require new ways of learning, new ways of working together, and new definitions and measures of progress and success…Engaged work draws upon many perspectives to frame questions, explore options, and develop and then apply solutions to challenges, both in the local community and beyond. (Ramaley, 2014, p. 9)

In other words, if scholars are to produce work that matters to the world and that affects the public good for the better, then scholars must position themselves as *engaged* scholars, i.e., scholars who engage with real-world problems and who address these problems by partnering with those most directly affected by these problems.

The push for institutions of higher education to become more directly engaged in the welfare of society resulted, in large part, from the critique that universities were increasingly becoming ivory towers that abdicated responsibility for public wellbeing. Critics of academia had observed that some scholars

see themselves primarily as researchers…and their commitment to their academic disciplines does not typically translate into a commitment to social responsibility or involvement in community engagement. Such commitment is even considered a potential threat to their professional advancement within an academic organizational culture that typically instructs faculty to focus exclusively on research, publication, and teaching and offers no rewards for social engagement. (Keynan, 2014, p. 184)

Furthermore, when faculty adopt this attitude of disengagement from the welfare of society, undergraduate and graduate students, unfortunately, tend to adopt this disposition as well: "[Lack of engagement in the community] clearly conveys to [students] that civic engagement is a less important work…[and] social responsibility…is excluded from the university's criteria of outstanding performance" (Keynan, 2014, p. 185; see also Harkavy & Hartley, 2012).

It should be noted that, as the passages above communicate, the lack of engaged scholarship emerging from a university is not always necessarily indicative of self-absorbed researchers, only interested in esoteric intellectual questions with little relevance to the public. In no small part, faculty are actively discouraged from engaging in community partnerships and real world issues precisely because faculty work within organizations that reward specialized (if not esoteric) research. Early-career researchers are often admonished to specialize and to become experts in narrow fields of inquiry, and these early-career researchers are often reminded that it is such research that will earn them the reward of promotion and tenure (Archer, 2009; Gardner, 2008; Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

In light of these observations, academia has been criticized for not always being visible within the broader public and for not always producing products that have real-world impact on practical problems (Doberneck, Glass, & Schweitzer, 2010; Jaeger & Thornton, 2006; Kezar, 2004; Saunders, 2010). Indeed, as already noted, institutions of higher education have, traditionally, been designed to discourage public engagement (Fairweather, 1996; Gonzales & Satterfield, 2013; O'Meara, 2002; Sherman, 2013).

As one specific manifestation of this unfortunate trend, publication in high-ranking journals is often placed at a premium above quality teaching and public outreach when faculty members are evaluated

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