Wellness and Worth: A Reflection on Community Engagement and the Academic Career Path

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Abstract

There is a disconnect in higher education between higher education professional practices and valuing the community impact of engaged scholars. In this reflective essay, the authors highlight personal experiences with the process of working toward and earning promotion and tenure in academic settings. Those personal experiences are then contextualized through an examination of the literature regarding evaluation processes, engagement-ready institutions, the history of campus engagement, and the role of community-engaged scholarship in the civic purpose of institutions of higher education. There are clear systemic contradictions that create misalignments between institutional aspirations and individual metrics for success. Faculty serving as boundary spanners advance institutional missions and create transformative student learning opportunities, while sometimes sacrificing personal and professional well-being.

Keywords: community-engaged scholarship, tenure and promotion, faculty well-being, boundary spanners

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The purpose of this reflective essay is to address the shifting dynamics of higher education, centering the responsibility of the academy and individual academics in both educating about and participating in community engagement (which often centers the reckoning of historical injustices in our society). Through personal reflections and connections to extant literature, the authors seek to highlight the disconnect between higher education professional practices and valuing the community impact of engaged scholars. The authors are female academics with extensive experience both working in communities and working within traditional career paths and academic tenure and promotion paradigms. The inclusion of personal experiences and reflections highlights wellness, well-being, and career sustainability, alongside evidence for innovations in professional development in the tenure and promotion process.

Personal Reflections

Author A

I began my professional academic career as an assistant professor in fall 2013. Six years later, in fall 2018, I went up for tenure and promotion to associate professor. During the intervening 6 years, I was approached with words of wisdom from colleagues many times. My department head told me that to achieve tenure and promotion I would need "about six" publications in peer-reviewed journals, plus making sure to do "some presentations" and serving on "a couple of committees" (that was the extent of her guidance). I was advised to not spend time writing grants or working in the community because that would take away from time that could be spent publishing. And many colleagues, some smiling and some not, reminded me of the old academic adage: "Remember, it's publish or perish."

And yet. As a faculty member focused on community health promotion, engagement in the community is a key component of my field. The value system of my field demands a service-oriented approach and advocates for deep partnerships between academic and community organizations. I teach my students to spend time building relationships in the community and to take time creating collaborative coalitions for improved health and well-being. I teach them that it takes time and trust to move the needle on community health. But in order to keep my job and keep teaching students about how to be engaged community health professionals, I needed to hurry up and publish "about six" articles and give "some presentations."

There was a deep disconnect between the metrics for success in community-engaged public health that I was teaching and the metrics for success against which I was being evaluated. And, although my department's standards for promotion and tenure were vague, it was clear that original and empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals was the expectation. There was no discussion about alternate scholarship models and certainly no inclusion of community engagement as a legitimate academic pursuit on its own.

Over time, things have changed to some degree. Although I still feel a structural disconnect between the traditional metrics of evaluating scholarship and the newer ways of considering community-engaged scholarship, I must give my institution credit for some forward momentum. In the past 5 years, my institution has created an Office of Community Engagement that is tasked with helping faculty to embed engagement into the curriculum and promoting community-engaged scholarship. Our institutional faculty handbook specifically mentions the connection between community engagement (service) and the scholarship of application, with latitude given to departments regarding how peer review is defined. This is progress. Junior faculty at my institution today have more structure and guidance regarding community engagement in the tenure process than I did. As I move toward seeking promotion to full professor, there is much more clarity and documentation to scaffold my efforts than there was for faculty 10 years ago. I have the relative privilege today of feeling that my work can speak for itself within the parameters that I, along with my colleagues, was able to help develop.

Author B

I am currently a full professor and also followed the traditional schedule for tenure and promotion. This included 7 years as an assistant professor, 7 years as an associate professor, and promotion to full professor in February 2020. Prior to being hired as an assistant professor, I was a full-time instructor in the same academic department while completing my PhD and was subsequently hired as faculty. My area of expertise was in nonprofit management and leadership, and accordingly I was hired into a position that also included directing a nonprofit certificate program. The 7 years of assistant professorship was a constant pull between being engaged in the community, which is essential and important in being a credible nonprofit leader, while also being expected to publish. In my third year it was advised that I quit, or pause, all community engagement, step down from any nonprofit board of directors I sat on, and halt all service commitments to focus on publishing. Reflection on this advice, especially within a nonprofit management academic focus, has led me to find this guidance contradictory to the advancement of the discipline, benefit to students, and support for the community. In addition, as a young faculty member in age and years in the academy, and often feeling powerless, I listened to the advice and informed my community partners of my shift in focus for the next few years. I didn't see any other option. It is unlikely a young faculty member is going to understand how to advocate that their community-engaged work, their "service" in communities that may be informing programs, services, and systems in community-based organizations, be considered scholarship. Instead one does what one is told.

Tenure and Promotion

In considering the path to tenure and promotion (and the accompanying mentality sometimes referred to as "publish or perish"), faculty have a limited amount of time to prove their worth to their academic institution. But the metrics for that proof are sometimes difficult to quantify outside the traditional indicators like number of publications. In fact, it is well-documented that higher education places a greater value on research and scholarship than on teaching, and that it values both of those over service. This emphasis is operationalized such that community engagement is linked

most closely to service, and scholarship is linked with research outputs that prioritize eminence and productivity (Janke et al., 2023). The timeline for research and publication leaves little room for the relatively slow process of relationship- and trust-building that is required for healthy community engagement.

The conflict between individual faculty engagement and institutional norms has been summarized with great clarity by Jessani et al. (2020) in their study of academic incentives for faculty engagement in schools of public health. "Deliberations on incentives leads to a larger debate on how to shift the culture of academia beyond incentives for individuals who are *engagement-inclined* to institutions that are *engagement-ready*, without imposing on or penalizing faculty who are *choice-disengaged*" (p. 9). One key issue highlighted by Jessani et al. is the conundrum of how to develop metrics that accurately capture engagement work by faculty. They noted that engagement activities often "transcend mere transactions to being more relational and perhaps even transformational; hence unquantifiable" (p. 9).

Engagement-Ready Institutions

Although literature exists that outlines characteristics and competencies for faculty and researchers who want to pursue community engagement, very little is known about what characteristics would make an academic institution "engagement-ready." For example, Shea et al. (2017) described 40 competencies organized into nine domains that are critical for researchers to assess whether they are ready to take part in community-engaged dissemination and implementation. However, the literature offers no corresponding competencies for academic institutions to assess readiness to tangibly support faculty and researchers working in community engagement efforts.

Institutionalizing community engagement in institutions of higher education was organized as a nationwide effort with the development of the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement in 2006, currently being facilitated by the American Council on Education. Shortly after the inception of this classification, Sandmann et al. (2009) wrote about leading engaged institutions and the importance of rewarding community-engaged scholarship, while also noting the need for new approaches to assess service-learning, described as "the

most important curricular vehicle of community engagement" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. iii). Weerts and Sandmann (2008) noted that the work of community-engaged faculty should not be lumped into and aligned with teaching or service roles, but is better included as part of the faculty's scholarship and research. Fifteen years after Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990) was published, Calleson et al. (2005) outlined the gap between "recommendations made by national commissions and national governing bodies, and the reality of how promotion and tenure actually works [in health professions schools]" (para. 3). To do what is best for the profession, to be engaged and impacting outcomes in a community, is risky in the academy. Faculty opting to be both engaged in the community and in the academy are likely paying a personal price. And are we getting any better?

In a study of departmental policy documents, Janke et al. (2023) examined promotion and tenure standards to assess the language used to describe community-engaged scholarship and how those terms were integrated into faculty assessment. Although the authors assessed policies across departments at a single university, they found significant variation and inconsistency in how community-engaged scholarship was defined and how it was integrated. The authors noted that although ambiguity in how community-engaged scholarship was defined may have allowed faster expansion of the policies, it ultimately hindered growth and any transformations in faculty assessment. "When in doubt as to its legitimacy as scholarship, faculty tend to be more likely to dismiss community-engaged scholarship as service, which is typically the least regarded faculty role" (Janke et al., 2023, p. 39). Indeed, when institutions push the burden of defining the scholarship of engagement onto departments, it is the boundary-spanning junior faculty that bear the brunt of proving the worth of that work.

This is not a challenge limited to just a few institutions. In a study of evaluation of community-engaged scholarship that included five R1 institutions that were classified as engaged campuses by the Carnegie Foundation, Wendling (2023) found that although the classification requires institutions to show clear ways to recognize engaged faculty, there was still a lack of appropriate metrics. Faculty respondents

at those five institutions reported challenges regarding how to label and present their community-engaged scholarship in ways that adhered to traditional metrics of research (publications and grant dollars, for example). In addition, there was the added challenge of having to argue for the legitimacy and rigor of their community-engaged scholarship when colleagues called it into question due to a lack of understanding. Another study (Cooper, 2014) documented the perceptions of faculty who embraced service-learning for 10 years, and when noting the impact on tenure and promotion, two themes emerged: the importance of service-learning being accepted as a valued pedagogy within their discipline and department, and recognition that for service-learning to be effective, a commitment of time for relationship-building, complexity, and problem-solving was important. According to Cooper, some faculty indicated service-learning had a positive impact on their tenure decisions; however, this was not universal, nor without its challenges, and "other forms of scholarship were stressed" (p. 420).

Historical Context and Disconnects

Let's pause a moment on the discussion of today's landscape and shift to how the historical context of community engagement at academic institutions has led us to the disconnects that affect our well-being. There is a broader context to consider in the ways colleges and universities commit to engagement for relevance. In 1985 Frank Newman wrote:

> If there is a crisis in education in the United States today, it is less that test scores have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most significant responsibility of the nation's schools and colleges. (p. 31)

Newman's report caught the attention of presidents of institutions across the nation, and subsequently 110 presidents joined together to form Campus Compact—an organization whose aim was to educate students on how to be citizens. As noted by Hartley and Saltmarsh (2016), the first meeting of Campus Compact focused discussion on advancing public service through volunteerism and integrating community-based activities into courses. There was both early skepticism

toward giving credit for service and support for what is typically referred to as service-learning.

Next there was the rise of service-learning along with a number of scholars and practitioners developing a set of principles that grounded the rise of service-learning as a pedagogy and movement. Between 1998 and 2004 the infrastructure to support community engagement grew across institutions of higher education. Between 2004 and 2012 the emphasis on civic education expanded, evidenced by publications, awards, and the development of offices and centers to lead the efforts of community engagement on campuses across the country (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016). Hundreds of institutions have an office or center that focuses on community engagement and service-learning, and these offices may even expand their function to advancing social justice. In the last paragraph outlining the history of civic engagement, Hartley and Saltmarsh wrote:

> They [next generation engagement scholars] entered into their faculty careers with an expectation that they would be able to be engaged scholars—that they would be able to do engaged scholarly work in all aspects of their faculty role. They expected that the institution would provide the intellectual space and support to allow them to thrive as engaged scholars. They did not enter faculty careers resigned to delayed fulfillment of their ideals through accommodation to traditional norms only to be able to thrive later in their post-tenure careers. They would not have to heal the divisions in their inner life because they would resist the disciplinary and institutional cultures that fostered such division. (p. 31)

And so here we are. Yes, there are publications, research and scholarly articles, and offices across the nation that support and lead the advancement of the public purpose of higher education. However, we must ask whether this blended effort of service to community, development of civic skills, and studies within specific academic disciplines are as seamless as Hartley and Saltmarsh imagined at the time. What are the experiences of these "next generation engaged scholars"? It might be that we still have some work to do to realize the ability for

all engaged scholars to thrive in the academy. Although the reality of an academician shaping their professional, personal, and civic identity is complex, maneuvering the tenure and promotion process in all its varied forms—and often constructed on R1 research expectations—seems, at least to these two authors, an unnecessary obstacle. We further contend that this obstacle should not be left to the young, new assistant professor to "make the case" to overcome and prove that their engaged scholarship is meaningful enough to warrant continued progress and/or promotion.

Civics and Democracy in Higher Education

It is an agreed-upon notion that higher education has a role in civics education and that, in upholding our democracy, colleges and universities have a responsibility to equip students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to understand the principles of democracy and the importance of civic engagement (Newman, 1985; Weerts, 2019). Colleges and universities encourage the development of an informed and active citizenry through extracurricular activities, community engagement, community-based research, and volunteerism as well as service-learning initiatives. Through these many forms of engagement, students can learn to apply their knowledge in practical ways that contribute to the betterment of society. For success in this endeavor, students must have guidance from faculty who are also doing those things well. And to do these things well, faculty must be engaged in careful, thoughtful relationship-building in the community, and students must be guided in transformational work in addition to transactional work. Transactional projects that have an exchange of time for service such as volunteering at a local food pantry are important; society, however, needs students to learn how to be engaged in transformational work in their professions and their communities. This is how faculty serve as boundary spanners to enhance student learning and benefit society.

The vision and missions of institutions across the country can be realized only through individual action, through connecting and relationships with community, people to people. Connecting this way requires going out into the community, joining associations, and attending events, all of which take time; time

that is not rewarded nor recognized as essential for community-engaged scholars. Mintz (2022) noted two trends that give credibility to the need for the academy to reflect on its role in a democracy. First, "Civics education is all the rage. If there's any issue that the nation's political leaders agree upon, it's this: that the teaching of civics and knowledgeable, responsible citizenship has never been more important or necessary" (para. 1). Interestingly, not only is there consensus on the need for embedding responsible citizenship into higher education, "as many as two-thirds of Americans now think U.S. democracy is in crisis" (para. 9). Higher education is at a crossroads where questions are raised about the relevance of academia and about the often agonizing path to tenure for faculty who are engaged in a community. Engaged faculty are directly relevant in their communities, and by the nature of who they are and their discipline are impacting programs and services directly.

Personal Well-Being

The significance and importance of this issue connects to the challenges faced by higher education institutions—community-engaged scholars and boundary spanners are those academics whose practice is directly impacting communities yet who may struggle in the tenure and promotion process if their work does not align with more traditional metrics of success. A Google search on the "criticisms of higher education" produces countless results. Chamorro-Premuzic and Frankiewicz (2019) wrote:

> And while research is the engine of growth and innovation, which explains the strong emphasis top academic universities place on it, it should not be an excuse to neglect the actual education offered to students, including the critical issue of preparing them for the real world. (para. 10)

The authors of this essay, and many community-engaged scholars "preparing students for the real world" suffer in the academy because of their focus on community engagement. One author recalls talking with an assistant professor pretenure. This person described themselves as miserable due to the requirement to publish in journals they didn't see as relevant to their work, and added that the organizations in the community they partnered with would suffer in the years just before they became tenured.

In fact, the literature supports the sentiments of this pretenure faculty member. Self-reported levels of stress are highest among academic professionals at the lowest ranks; lack of perceived control, feeling intensely scrutinized, and having poor work–life balance can contribute to the difficulty of coping with the stress. In addition, when faculty receive mixed messages (contradicting information from different sources) and the promotion standards seem like a moving target (with expectations shifting and changing), frustration and confusion are enhanced (Wells et al., 2019). It is important to note the added burdens and challenges present for women and people of color in the tenure and promotion process. There is substantial evidence in the literature that retention rates for female faculty and faculty of color are lower than for their male and White counterparts. Isolation and demoralization are also higher for female faculty and faculty of color (Durodoye et al., 2020). A 2023 brief from the American Psychological Association pointed out that when pursuing academic careers, faculty of color are specifically looking for departments that are explicit in their prioritization of community engagement and recognition of faculty contributions to the community. In fact, the recommendations cited in the report as beneficial for faculty of color would improve the mixed messages, moving targets, and general misalignments for all faculty. This report recommended, among other things, aligning tenure expectations with opportunity and need, being creative with scholarship metrics beyond such elements as the more traditional citation counts, and aligning expectations of faculty with institutional values (APA, 2023).

We believe, and the evidence supports, that community-engaged scholarship can and should be rigorous, complex, meaningful, and relevant. There are clear standards for high-quality community engagement. It is demoralizing when institutions, through their promotion and tenure processes, tell faculty that what they know is important (engaging in their communities) doesn't "matter" professionally. It is a form of professional violence against the value systems of scholars who are ready and willing to do the hard work of collaboration. Changing institutional practices or measurement standards around tenure and promotion to include metrics around community engagement should still retain a focus on rigor and scholarly quality. Institutions can prioritize both rigorous scholarship and creative community engagement. Individual faculty are carrying the burden of upholding the stated engagement values of their institutions and paying the price in their own well-being. Straightforward institutional solutions are present that could both improve faculty well-being and promote the values and goals of colleges and universities. In short, alignment is possible. Faculty well-being will improve and institutions will continue to improve their relevance in society. We know this because we live it.

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