

A Feminist Phenomenological Analysis of Community Engaged Researchers' Experience of Institutional Support (Dissertation Overview)

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Abstract

Community-engaged scholars play an important role in public universities' mission to serve the public good, yet their experiences in the academy are not well understood. Although scholarly literature advocates for broad forms of support for community engagement, little is known about how faculty actually experience support strategies. This dissertation (Phaup, 2022) explored and described how community-engaged researchers at a public institution experienced institutional support. Using a hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological design, the study examined faculty experiences through a phenomenological lens. Gender emerged as a significant dimension during analysis, prompting the incorporation of a feminist theoretical lens to interpret power dynamics, inequities, and gendered patterns in the data. This complementary framework enabled a deeper understanding of how institutional structures, positionality, and gender shaped access to and experiences of support. Findings revealed a range of experiences, suggesting that more tailored support, particularly for women and other groups with shared identities, is needed.

Keywords: faculty, institutional support, feminist, phenomenology, community engagement



Existing research about higher education community engagement has explored institutionalization (Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; Franz et al., 2012; Holland, 2009; Moore & Ward, 2010; Vogelgesang et al., 2010) and promotion and tenure systems (Ellison & Eatman, 2008; Foster, 2010; O'Meara, 2006; Vuong et al., 2017) as methods of support for this work. However, these methods take an undifferentiated approach to support for this influential group without understanding the nuanced lived experiences of the individuals affected. Current research overlooks what broader conceptualizations of institutional support mean to the faculty themselves. This study addresses this consequential gap, investigating the experiences of community-engaged scholars at a broad access institution as they relate to institutional support.

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualita-

tive phenomenological study was to explore and describe the way community-engaged researchers experienced institutional support as they worked through unexpected changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The study describes the essence of the experience among community-engaged scholars, emphasizing their subjective experiences, which are grounded in sociocultural contexts. Providing richer understandings of engaged scholars' lived experiences contributes to tailored support for faculty in the field. The central research question explored in the dissertation was, During the COVID-19 pandemic, how do community-engaged researchers at a public research university experience institutional support?

Philosophical Framework

The purpose of this study required a framework attentive to how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. Through

phenomenological research methodology, the researcher gains insight into the complexities of human experience by slowing down to understand how people interpret the world around them (Finlay, 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology, grounded in social constructivism, aligns with this emphasis on contextualized meaning-making and therefore served as the philosophical foundation for this research.

Four of the five study participants were women, making gender a salient contextual factor in the study. During analysis, gender emerged as an important dimension of participants' experiences. In response, a feminist theoretical lens was incorporated to interpret the power dynamics, inequities, and gendered patterns revealed in the data. This emergent feminist lens complemented the phenomenological attention to sociocultural context and enabled a deeper understanding of how institutional structures, positionality, and gender shaped access to and experiences of support.

Research Methods

In accordance with the philosophical framework, qualitative methods were employed, including participant interviews and interpretive phenomenological analysis for data collection and analysis. In-depth interviews offered the ability to get as close as possible to the essence of participants' lived experiences to explore their meaning-making. Employing a phenomenological approach, this study identified the essence of life for a community-engaged scholar as described by those who live it.

Data analysis was guided by Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology, with an emphasis on the subjectivity and temporal nature of lived experience (Moran, 2000), and interpretive phenomenological analysis, or IPA, from the field of psychology (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The purpose of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, with close attention to the meanings particular experiences and events hold for participants.

Study participants were five faculty members at a broad access institution in the Pacific Northwest. Participants were selected from the same institution to ensure similar cultural contexts. Parameters included a full-time faculty position, scholarship that has been primarily community-engaged, and efforts to engage with community

partners that continued through the crisis events of 2020. Participants were identified by a key community engagement professional at the institution.

Data collection included semistructured interviews in two rounds with each participant, consistent with IPA guidelines for eliciting rich, first-person accounts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Interviews varied in length and were followed by reflective journal/memos and analytic note-taking, which supported an iterative, interpretive engagement with the data throughout the study.

Data analysis for this study followed the four steps of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These steps included reading and exploratory notes, formulating experiential statements, finding connections and clustering experiential statements, and compiling the table of personal experiential themes.

Results

Participants represented a diverse faculty population spanning five different departments and five different position types, as shown in Table 1. Although all held full-time faculty positions at the same institution with a reputation for a culture of engagement, their experiences with institutional support for their community-engaged research were highly diverse.

Data was analyzed through cross-case thematic analysis using an iterative, interpretive phenomenological process. Multiple readings of transcripts, reflexive memoing, and clustering of experiential statements supported the development of four overarching thematic categories (see Table 2).

Study participants found the most meaning in a supportive campus culture, collaborative relationships, and access to campus resources. However, their access to these institutional supports was inequitable. When they had access to the support they needed, study participants experienced feelings of inclusion, validation, security, and ease in their work, whereas a lack of access to necessary forms of support led to feelings of exclusion, frustration, instability, and devaluation of their work. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inequities among them and drew attention to factors influencing their experiences with support. These factors included faculty position type,

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Data

Participant (pseudonym)	Years in role	Gender	Position	Discipline
Susan	15	Female	Associate professor (non-tenure)	Art
Carol	6	Female	Research associate (non-tenure)	Environmental studies
Steven	12	Male	Professor	Architecture
Mary	5	Female	Assistant professor (non-tenure)	Education
Ashley	3	Female	Assistant professor (tenure-track)	Social work

Table 2. Essential Themes

Categories	Essential themes
“Support is . . .”	Access to resources
	Supportive campus culture
	Relationships
“Support means . . .”	Inclusion or exclusion
	Validation for work that is meaningful
	Frustration or ease
	Equity
	Stability and security
“Support is influenced by . . .”	Discipline and department
	Type of institution
	Faculty position type
	Gender
The COVID-19 context	Transition to virtual interactions
	Changing plans
	Access to resources
	Time factors
	New protocols
	Missing personal connections

academic department, and the culture of engagement at the institution.

Some themes were common across all cases, including the significance of campus culture, access to resources, and the influence of the discipline, department, and institution type on their experience. However, other themes were less common and more important for specific individuals, such as the influence of gender and privilege. The discussion that follows considers the implications of both types of themes in a broader context.

Discussion

This study extends the conversation in the literature by highlighting the lived experience of five community-engaged researchers, adding texture and nuance to the existing understanding of institutional support for community-engaged scholars.

Interviews were often dominated by conversations about factors that influence the participants’ experience. For that reason, findings were interpreted, in part, through a

lens of equity, inclusion, and privilege, particularly related to gender. Correspondingly, critical feminist theory views gender as an omnipresent feature of social life and personal identity, making it inextricable from an analysis of social life (Taylor et al., 2007). Phenomenology centers the voices and lived experiences of participants, who in this case were loud and clear about their experiences being shaped by issues of equity.

Not only does hermeneutic phenomenology support attention to social, cultural, and historic aspects of one's identity, but critique and challenge of power structures are embedded in the foundations of higher education community engagement (Dolgon et al., 2017). The symmetry between the philosophical foundation of this study, the phenomenon itself, and the researcher's identity affirmed the necessity of attending to the inequities among faculty members exposed through data analysis. Specifically, the influence of gender on experiences with institutional support was highlighted in faculty members' stories. For these reasons, the dissertation centered on the experiences of women faculty in community engagement, with a focus on gendered dimensions of institutional support.

Key Arguments

According to the data, the essence of the experience with support for community-engaged research is highly individualized, and making any generalizations would be superficial at best and harmful at worst. Four primary arguments support this understanding: (1) Women's experiences are different, (2) relationships are crucial, (3) context matters, and (4) undifferentiated forms of support are insufficient. The discussion that follows offers rationales for these four arguments and contextualizes them within the existing literature.

1. Women's Experiences Are Different

Through the analysis process, the data revealed gendered dynamics, making a feminist lens the most coherent and rigorous interpretive frame. The results were clear about gender's influence on community-engaged researchers' experience with institutional support. They reinforce Ward's (2010) findings that women's experiences are different. Plaxton-Moore (2021) demonstrated the need for alignment between women's ways of engagement and reward and recognition for community engagement,

and this study expands on her findings to suggest a need for alignment throughout all facets of institutional support. Women carry the weight of community engagement for the institution (Doberneck et al., 2011), yet the institution may not recognize and respond to their unique needs with regard to support.

Despite a lack of attention to gender in participant recruitment, four out of five faculty members in this study were women. Previous literature confirms that this ratio is not a coincidence. Women are, in fact, participating in community engagement in higher education with greater intensity and to a greater degree than their male colleagues (Antonio et al., 2000; Doberneck et al., 2011; Fairbairn, 2019; Turner, 2002). Not only are they participating more, but their ways of engagement, epistemological values, and experiences with community engagement are different (Holland, 2016; O'Meara, 2008; Turner, 2002; Ward, 2010).

During the data analysis process, evidence of the gendered patterns in how community-engaged researchers experienced institutional support was undeniable. The male participant reported institutional freedom and support and did not report feelings of inclusion or exclusion. In contrast, women consistently described navigating limited support through resilience, relational labor, and self-sufficiency. This discrepancy speaks to the intersecting biases experienced by women practicing community-engaged forms of scholarship (Turner, 2002).

Pursuing nontraditional work in the academy while holding marginalized identities presents compounding barriers for women engaged scholars. Not only are women marginalized in the academy for their gender identity, but community-engaged scholarship is often seen as unconnected to core academic work (Checkoway, 2001; O'Meara & Rice, 2005; Rice, 2002) and is also marginalized as a nontraditional academic pursuit. In the face of these challenges, however, women persist. Previous research argues that they do so because they are more committed to the collective than the individual (Ward, 2010). The women in this study have evidenced this commitment by consistently referring back to the institutional motto and values that ground their work within the larger web.

Women are attracted to community-engaged scholarship because its values and

principles are aligned with theirs (Antonio et al., 2000). Reciprocity, social justice, and social accountability (Beaulieu et al., 2018) are driving motivators for women scholars and also align with the public purpose mission of the institution in this study. This alignment should provide insight for institutional leaders to recognize and respond to the unique forms of support that are meaningful for women.

Strengthening the institution's community engagement agenda requires closer attention to the women who are performing a significant amount of the work. They need institutional support that accommodates relationship building and facilitates a sense of belonging in their work setting. Considering support through the lens of community-engaged scholarship would attend to reciprocity, sustainable relationships, reflection, equity, and centering marginalized voices. This approach would bring greater alignment between the institution's aspirational mission and the actual work and needs of the women shouldering the weight of the work. An authentic approach to institutional support would provide greater attention to the marginalized faculty persisting through intersecting barriers. Women should not have to be "scrappy" and resilient to be successful in their community-engaged scholarship that holds up the legacy of the institution.

2. Relationships Are Crucial

The women in this study consistently described their relationships with colleagues and community partners as valuable sources of support. Although they could look past challenges with funding and administrative offices, it was their relationships that appeared to have the greatest influence on their experiences. Undoubtedly, Plaxton-Moore (2021) was right when she argued that a sense of connectedness is highly valued in women's community-engaged scholarship.

In addition to explicit descriptions of the valuable relationships in their work lives, there was a conspicuous difference in the way the women spoke about their work compared to the male participant, who described support for his community engagement work from an individual perspective. The women, on the other hand, described their work collectively. The relationships women have in their community-engaged research were connected to feelings of joy,

comfort, and security. When the relationships were absent, they experienced despair, instability, and isolation. These differing experiences speak to women's need for rootedness and connectedness, as Plaxton-Moore (2021) asserted.

Higher education settings, generally, can cause feelings of social isolation (Pifer, 2011), with a common narrative of faculty as lone rangers (O'Meara et al., 2008). Adding marginalized identities and non-traditional approaches to scholarly work to this equation only exacerbates the feelings of marginality for women engaged scholars (Lindholm, 2003). Furthermore, women who pursue community-engaged scholarly agendas identify with the field's values, like reciprocity, contributing to the significance of relationships in their work. Previous research in higher education is clear that communal factors like academic department (Campbell & O'Meara, 2014), sense of community (van Lankveld et al., 2017), and group norms (Hora, 2008) influence faculty experiences. The data in this study suggest these factors are particularly salient for women engaged scholars.

There is evidence that social support for faculty improves their experiences and that relationships are of utmost importance for women participating in community-engaged research. Not only are relationships a crucial form of support for women, but they are an essential component of community-engaged research. Nonetheless, there are disparities in access to supportive relationships and networks among faculty. One of the clearest disparities, for this group of faculty, was in the departmental context. An approach to institutional support that honors the needs of women would prioritize resources and environments that facilitate and accommodate relationship building.

3. Context Matters

The contextual setting surrounding the community-engaged researchers in this study influenced their experience of institutional support. The most prominent factors included the type of institution, the disciplinary department, and the type of faculty position. For women in particular, a sense of rootedness and deep belonging are important factors in their experience with community engagement (Plaxton-Moore, 2021). Although literature in the higher education field broadly is clear about the significance of contextual factors (Englund

et al., 2018; Jawitz, 2009; Lee, 2004; Pifer et al., 2015) the scholarship of engagement has yet to fully investigate their influence on the experience of community-engaged scholars specifically.

Institution Type. The type of institution makes a difference in faculty experiences with support. The faculty in this study were drawn to this campus because it was a broad access institution with a mission supportive of community engagement. Faculty felt grounded in the campus culture associated with those distinctions. Broad access institutions play a crucial role in increasing educational equity by expanding access to postsecondary education for students who have historically been excluded (Klempin & Karp, 2018). It comes as no surprise that educators who identify with the core values of community engagement, including social justice and social responsibility, would feel at home in this type of educational setting. Ward (2010) explained that community-engaged scholarship is motivated, for women, by their sense of rootedness in place and an overpowering sense of responsibility to others. A broad access institution with a commitment to community engagement offers alignment with these values and lends itself to this sense of rootedness.

The institution in this study has a notable history and reputation for community engagement. A strength at this institution was the true commitment to community engagement and faculty members who stood firmly behind that mission. This commitment came through in nearly all interviews with faculty members as they routinely mentioned the university's motto and its significance in their work and in the lives of their students. However, the institutional values do not seem to translate through to the departmental level, where faculty are most impacted. Although the faculty expressed empathy and understanding for the constraints at the institutional level, they were not as forgiving in the departmental context.

The scholarship of engagement continues to explore the various approaches to institutionalizing community engagement, and this university has been successful in creating a culture of engagement. The faculty in this study stand behind the institution's mission and values and describe supportive elements at the institutional level. However, public broad access institutions are dependent on limited public funding, are often

underresourced, and are vulnerable to economic downturns (Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013). Indeed, funding was a common challenge described by faculty in this study. Nonetheless, the faculty were invested in the institutional mission and were sensitive to the financial constraints. Consequently, they were willing to be self-sufficient and find resources for their projects when institutional support was lacking.

Institutional Infrastructure. Although the faculty in this study found the campus culture and characteristics of a broad access institution to be supportive of their community-engaged research in a general sense, the institutional infrastructure had a greater influence on the day-to-day experience for most. Finding suitable logistical support for their research and a supportive socio-cultural climate were both connected to the departmental context. The differences between faculty members' home departments led to great variability in their experience with institutional support, making it more or less difficult to pursue their community-engaged research.

Not surprisingly, all faculty in this study mentioned administrative offices on campus as potential sources of support for their work. The institution's research office and business office were seen as necessary logistical resources to carry out their grant-funded research projects. However, faculty described these offices as unstable, inefficient, and not functional. These challenges contributed to strong feelings of frustration and even mystery and confusion. Uniquely, Ashley's department was equipped with its own robust research support infrastructure. This office provided individualized support with accessible staff and resources that contributed to a sense of ease and comfort in the research process.

Ashley's unique experience highlights the significance of the departmental context. For the women in the study, more than logistical support, the sociocultural conditions in the department had a meaningful influence on their experience. Feelings of inclusion or exclusion were associated with the relational climate of the department. Recognizing that women participating in community engagement seek deep belonging (Plaxton-Moore, 2021), the outcasting and exclusion that several women in this study experienced in their department suggests a harmful misalignment between their values and their daily contextual setting.

Faculty need both logistical support and social support at the departmental level. The significance of the structural and sociocultural conditions of the department is acknowledged in the higher education literature (Englund et al., 2018) but is underrecognized in the scholarship of engagement. The organizational structure of the university is included in key factors for institutionalizing community engagement (Furco et al., 2009; Gelmon et al., 2005; Holland, 1997; Kecskes, 2008; Saltmarsh, 2019), but the magnitude of the department's influence on faculty experiences is not explicitly identified. This omission is, perhaps, a result of the literature focusing on a universal approach to support while overlooking the distinct needs of women in the field.

Position Type. The faculty in this study held position types across the academic spectrum, and the difference among their experiences was undeniable. Whereas Steven experienced a compelling sense of freedom as an endowed professor, Mary described an inequitable distribution of labor that impacted how she spent her time. The type of position either supports or inhibits the faculty member's ability to participate in community-engaged research.

Faculty with secure and sustainable funding for their position, like the male participant, have more time available to pursue grant funding for their research projects. Meanwhile, faculty who must fund their own position have added restrictions on their time. Similarly, non-tenure-track faculty have more teaching responsibilities, especially when tenure-track faculty have course buy-outs to accommodate their research. Beyond time and availability, these differences contribute to the consequential experiences of inclusion and exclusion in their department, at least for the women in this study. Those with secure funding and tenure-track status experienced more legitimacy and recognition in their department than others.

Although the non-tenure-track faculty in this study felt their experience with community-engaged research would be improved if they held tenure-track positions, previous research found that lower ranking faculty demonstrate the highest levels of commitment to community engagement activities (Antonio et al., 2000). Similar to the discrepancy found between gender and institutional support, this juxtaposition

contributes to the misalignment between the values and contexts of community-engaged researchers. If lower ranking faculty are most committed to community engagement, attention needs to be given to their particular needs for support to reduce the difficulty they experience.

The contextual setting plays an important role in faculty experiences with institutional support for their community-engaged research. However, a supportive campus culture and institutional leadership are not enough. Faculty need support throughout the institutional infrastructure, including administrative offices and disciplinary departments. Additionally, the way faculty positions are funded and situated within the university contributes to, or detracts from, faculty's ability to access institutional support. Faculty experiences would be improved with a coordinated effort to align all campus offices and departments with the institution's advocacy for community engagement. Such alignment would ensure all faculty have equitable access to the support they need to carry out their community-engaged research.

4. Undifferentiated Forms of Support Are Insufficient

The faculty in this study each had distinct needs concerning institutional support, with a lack of consistency in their experiences. These needs are influenced by a variety of factors, including their personal lives and identities, as well as contextual factors in their work environment. Research about institutional support for community-engaged faculty has largely focused on institution-wide support from the leadership level while neglecting to understand the nuanced experience of individual faculty members. This study highlights the unique experiences of five faculty members and the factors that influence them. The differences among them point to the need to reconsider the undifferentiated approach and consider more tailored forms of support that promote equitable access among all faculty.

The research reinforced that experiences among faculty vary based on their faculty position type and their department, among other contextual factors. Those with endowed positions and tenured professor ranks experience a sense of security, freedom, and validation, whereas those with a non-tenure-track position without a collegial group struggled. In yet a different experience, a

participant in a department with a research office of its own received specialized support for research. The contextual environments often determined the support available to each and their process of accessing needed forms of support, which was easier for some than others.

The inequities resulting from these contextual institutional factors are compounded by the marginalized personal identities and lived experiences of the faculty in this study. In addition to the influence of gender, described above, the home life of faculty impacted their experience with support. Most notably, two participants acknowledged the additional challenges women face as mothers. Women's choices and flexibility in their work environment are restricted by their roles as mothers, and the added responsibility can leave them feeling pulled in many directions, impacting their feelings of success.

Two participants in this study did, in fact, name the privilege they experienced in their roles. Among other factors, this privilege was attributed to the exceptional training received in a doctoral program and the freedom in family life, compared to mothers of young children. The male participant expressed gratitude for the unique privilege he experiences in his role at the university. He understands the unique freedom he has with an endowed tenured position. Those with less privilege in their roles need greater access to the institutional support that others are more easily accessing. They may also need differentiated forms of support based on their histories, personal lives, and

contextual positioning at the institution, among other factors.

The literature about institutional support for community-engaged scholars presents a one-size-fits-all approach. However, this study demonstrates how the unique needs of individual faculty members necessitate differentiated forms of support. Faculty members' needs are influenced, in part, by personal identities and positionality within the institution, some of which come with privilege while others are disadvantaged. Certain privileges lead to greater access to and benefits from institutional support, creating inequitable experiences for community-engaged scholars. Therefore, institutional support needs to account for the varied histories and contexts of each individual rather than providing undifferentiated systematic supports to all community-engaged researchers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that institutional support for community-engaged researchers is experienced in highly individualized and inequitable ways, shaped by gender, positionality, departments, and roles. The findings highlight the saliency of contextual factors, the significance of relationships, and the individuality of community-engaged researchers' needs. As institutional leaders continue the meaningful work of refining their approach to support for community-engaged faculty, the findings in this study offer important insights to consider in building out more equitable, nuanced strategies.



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