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Same Words, Different Worlds: Navigating Semantic Drift in Higher Education's Outreach and Community Engagement Discourse

David E. Meens

Abstract

This article examines the challenge of semantic drift in higher education's community engagement discourse, where terms like "outreach" and "engagement" have expanded beyond their original scholarly definitions and been appropriated by institutional actors for diverse purposes. Drawing upon the relevant literature and the author's experience as an administrator and practitioner, this analysis demonstrates that scholarly responses emphasizing boundary work to police definitional integrity prove counterproductive to goals of institutionalization and promotion of high-quality practice. The article argues for an alternative approach (strategic adaptation) that maintains scholarly rigor while engaging productively with evolving institutional usage. Operationalized through an outreach and engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT), this pragmatic approach emphasizes semantic differentiation, plural aims, and zones of strategic overlap. The article demonstrates how strategic adaptation enables community engagement scholars to influence emerging policy and practice while preserving analytical precision necessary for meaningful research and assessment.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement, public participation, public engagement, community engagement, higher education outreach

The scholarly literature on civic and community engagement in higher education faces a fundamental challenge that extends beyond methodological concerns to the very language through which the field defines itself. As universities increasingly embrace community engagement as a strategic priority, core concepts such as "outreach" and "engagement" have undergone significant semantic drift—the process whereby word meanings change over time through complex interactions between pragmatic usage and conventional meaning (Traugott & Dasher, 2001)—expanding far beyond their original scholarly and practical definitions to encompass a broad range of institutional activities. This linguistic evolution presents community engagement scholars with a critical choice: maintain definitional purity through boundary work or adapt strategically to influence emerging institutional practices.

Drawing upon both the research literature and the author's experience as an administrator and practitioner in higher education, this article argues that boundary work approaches—although well-intentioned—prove counterproductive to the goals of institutionalization and promotion of high-quality practice. Instead, a strategic adaptation approach offers greater promise for advancing both scholarly understanding and institutional practice. This pragmatic and pluralist strategy emphasizes semantic differentiation and distinctions between normative aims, paired with articulation of zones of strategic overlap. I argue that this combination of elements is most likely to enable community engagement scholars to exert influence on emerging policy and practice while preserving the analytical precision necessary for meaningful research and assessment.

The analysis that follows demonstrates

how the field's tendency toward normative boundary work has inadvertently marginalized engagement scholarship from institutional decision-making processes. By contrast, strategic adaptation—illustrated through the outreach and engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT)—provides a framework for productive engagement with diverse institutional stakeholders while maintaining scholarly rigor and commitment to transformational practice.

The Problem of Semantic Drift in Community Engagement

Semantic drift represents a particular challenge for community engagement scholarship because it occurs at the intersection of academic theory and institutional practice—a space that practitioners must but that researchers may or may not navigate on a daily basis. For terms like "outreach" and "engagement" to serve as anchors within the academic discourse of engagement scholarship, it is essential that they be given consistent and relatively precise application across research contexts, in order to build the field's findings and theoretical knowledge base. Advancing knowledge in any domain requires that we are discussing, and are aware that we are discussing, the same phenomena under investigation.

Such terms also carry "commonsense" (i.e., pervasively intuitive) meanings that make them susceptible to appropriation and dilution across contexts. The fact that these words, in their stipulative academic definitions, anchor a discourse of both research and practice stands in tension with their availability to commonsense usage. From a practitioner perspective, this dual usage creates confusion not only in scholarly discourse but in day-to-day operations where different institutional actors use, as a matter of course, the same terms to describe fundamentally different activities.

Outreach, in its commonsense usage, refers to efforts by one entity to extend beyond its traditional domain to contact others. *Engagement* implies mutual contact and influence—analogous to interlocking gears that affect each other's movement, rather than mechanisms spinning independently. Even at this general level, the distinction between "outreach" and "engagement" thus matters enormously for practitioners attempting to design, implement, and assess a whole range of activities. Yet even the distinction in commonsense usage becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as institutional actors appropriate the language for different purposes.

In light of these dynamics, we can understand why the effort by scholars to fix the definitions of key terms in both literature and practice has been central to the development of the field. These efforts have not forestalled semantic drift; if anything, the positive normative valence associated with "community" and "engagement" that results from such scholarly efforts in turn accelerates appropriation of these terms by institutional actors seeking to align their activities with values of authenticity, equity, and reciprocity (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Activities previously characterized as outreach, recruitment, public relations, or customer service may be rebranded as "engagement" to benefit from these positive connotations, regardless of whether the underlying practices embody the reciprocal, transformational characteristics that define genuine community engagement (Dostilio et al., 2012).

This appropriation creates significant challenges for both scholarly discourse and practical implementation. For scholarship, it complicates construct validity in research and obscures important distinctions between transactional and transformational approaches to university–community relationships (Checkoway, 2001). For practitioners, it complicates efforts to design meaningful partnerships, assess program effectiveness, and communicate with diverse stakeholders about institutional commitments. When "engagement" can mean anything from a one-way information session to a multiyear collaborative research partnership, both community partners and institutional stakeholders struggle to understand what universities in fact offer and expect from their relationships.

The Carnegie Foundation Definition: Scholarly Anchor and Institutional Constraint

By far the most successful attempt to fix the meaning of "community engagement" in higher education comes from the Carnegie Foundation. The foundation's definition has occupied a central position in higher education discourse since its introduction in the early 2000s, serving simultaneously

as scholarly anchor and institutional framework. Carnegie defines community engagement as "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (American Council on Education, 2025, para. 1). This definition emerged during development of an elective Community Engagement Classification, designed to recognize institutions demonstrating significant commitment to community partnership.

Scholarly Influence and Institutional Adoption

The Carnegie definition has achieved remarkable penetration within academic discourse, becoming the de facto standard for community engagement scholarship and institutional self-assessment. Its emphasis on collaboration, mutual benefit, partnerships, and reciprocity aligned with emerging scholarly consensus about best practices in university–community relationships, while its institutional legitimacy provided a framework that administrators could readily adopt for strategic planning and external communication.

The definition's scholarly influence is evident in its widespread citation across the community engagement literature, where it functions as both normative ideal and operational standard. Researchers regularly invoke Carnegie's language to establish theoretical foundations, assess institutional practices, and critique activities that fall short of its reciprocal ideal. The definition has become so embedded in scholarly discourse that many studies assume rather than examine its conceptual adequacy, treating it as settled knowledge rather than one particular construction of complex university–community relationships.

Beyond classification processes, the Carnegie definition shapes hiring practices, promotion criteria, and resource allocation decisions across higher education. This widespread institutional adoption has created path dependency effects, where the definition becomes increasingly difficult to modify or replace as institutions develop systems and processes aligned with its framework.

Contemporary Relevance and Limitations

Although Carnegie's definition has contributed to increased legitimacy of community engagement work in institutional contexts, its implementation reveals significant tensions between normative ideals and organizational realities. Twenty years after its introduction, the Carnegie definition faces challenges from multiple directions. Community-based scholars and practitioners increasingly critique its university-centric framing and limited attention to power dynamics, community sovereignty, and social justice concerns.

Although such internal critiques—that is, criticisms of the Carnegie definition from within its own aspirational framework—may be valid, they fall short of identifying what I argue is the more significant theoretical limitation of the Carnegie definition. I refer here to the "external" critique that it does not in fact describe, align with, or capture major outreach and engagement functions essential to the modern university. Presented with Carnegie's definition and framework, I have heard from several institutional leaders responses to the effect that "It's all well and good, but that's just not what we do in [public relations, student recruitment, alumni relations, advancement, etc.]." The Carnegie definition can be considered a mirror that reveals to us the essential content and perhaps the normative ideal of community engagement. But many external engagement practitioners find that, when this mirror is held before them, they simply do not recognize themselves in it.

Simultaneously, institutional actors continue to expand the definition's application to activities that stretch its conceptual boundaries, using engagement language to describe everything from economic development initiatives to marketing campaigns. This expansion reflects both the definition's positive valence and its conceptual limitations in distinguishing between different types of university–community relationships. In this somewhat fraught context, the definition's continued centrality in scholarly discourse reflects the field's limited development of alternative frameworks that balance normative clarity with practical applicability.

Definitional Challenges and the Limits of Boundary Work

The prevalence of definitional challenges and the tendency toward normative boundary work in community engagement scholarship has been a recurring theme in

the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (JHEOE) since its inception. The publication was itself launched in 1996 as *The Journal of Public Service and Outreach* before changing names, exemplifying the semantic instability that has characterized the field.

Giles (2008) explicitly identified "variability of the central terminology" (p. 98) as a central challenge facing the emerging field, noting that the lack of conceptual clarity undermines both scholarly rigor and practical implementation. Driscoll and Sandmann (2001/2016) observed early on that the need for "translating" engagement scholarship into traditional academic categories demonstrates how institutional adoption often requires conceptual compromise. Additionally, Fear and Sandmann (2001/2016) highlighted how scholarly attempts to define engagement within existing disciplinary and institutional categories inevitably distort its essential characteristics. In the broader literature, others have gone further by arguing that such distortions in translation and appropriation present a fundamental challenge to the engagement movement's ability to achieve its aims (Kliewer, 2013; Meens, 2012, 2014).

One response to semantic drift involves intensifying definitional boundary work—developing more stringent normative definitions and asserting that appropriative uses represent illegitimate deviations from scholarly usage. This approach reflects a commitment to conceptual precision and normative clarity that has deep roots in the community engagement literature.

Prevalence of Normative Approaches in Engagement Scholarship

A review of frequently cited JHEOE articles reveals a consistent pattern of scholarly effort to establish and maintain definitional boundaries around engagement terminology. Holland's (1999/2016) analysis of faculty involvement in public service demonstrated how scholars have historically approached definitional work through normative frameworks that specify what engagement "should" look like rather than examining how it actually manifests in diverse institutional contexts. Similarly, O'Meara and Saltmarsh's (2008/2016) integrated model reveals how normative approaches can become prescriptive in ways that limit rather than enhance institutional capacity for community partnership. Although well-intentioned, these approaches reflect the field's tendency to privilege scholarly definitions over the practical wisdom that emerges from sustained community partnership work.

Institutional Resistance to Scholarly Boundary Work

Although boundary work expresses a natural tendency among promoters aiming to preserve and promote specific values and practices, significant limitations face this strategy in the current higher education context. Sandmann et al.'s (2009) study of early Carnegie-classified institutions reveals how institutional actors consistently interpret and implement engagement definitions to serve their own priorities rather than conforming to scholarly specifications.

The constituencies and interests appropriating community engagement terminology—senior administrators, development offices, marketing departments—often wield greater institutional power than scholars rooted in the academic tradition of public engagement. Practitioners working within these institutional structures face the daily reality that scholarly definitions, however well-crafted, must compete with more powerful institutional narratives about efficiency, visibility, and resource generation.

Fitzgerald et al.'s (2012/2016) analysis of "the centrality of engagement" acknowledges this reality, noting that engagement has become so institutionally ubiquitous that traditional boundary work strategies prove inadequate. Their observation that engagement language appears across virtually all university functions suggests that scholarly efforts to contain or control definitional usage face insurmountable practical obstacles.

Importantly, boundary work also risks marginalizing community engagement scholarship from broader institutional conversations about university–community relationships. As engagement language becomes institutionally ubiquitous, scholars who insist on restrictive definitions may find themselves excluded from policy discussions, strategic planning processes, and resource allocation decisions that ultimately shape institutional practice. Administrators and staff responsible for community engagement programs need scholarly guidance that helps them navigate institutional pressures while maintaining commitment

to high-quality practice—guidance that boundary work approaches often fail to provide.

Strategic Adaptation: Engaging the Conversation

A more promising approach involves strategic adaptation—modifying scholarly usage to remain intelligible to diverse audiences while maintaining analytical distinctions necessary for rigorous research and practice. This strategy recognizes that language evolves through use and that scholars can more effectively influence emerging conceptions by participating in institutional conversations than by remaining on the margins.

Learning From Engagement Scholarship's Evolution

The higher education community engagement literature provides compelling evidence for the potential of strategic adaptation approaches. Driscoll and Sandmann's (2001/2016) retrospective analysis demonstrated that the field's greatest successes occurred when scholars engaged productively with institutional realities rather than insisting on pure normative approaches. Fear and Sandmann's (2001/2016) examination of the "new" scholarship suggested that conceptual flexibility, rather than definitional rigidity, enables scholarly influence on emerging practices. Fitzgerald et al.'s (2012/2016) analysis supported this argument by demonstrating how engagement concepts have successfully influenced institutional practice precisely because they proved adaptable to diverse contexts.

Strategic adaptation offers several demonstrated advantages. First, it aligns scholarly work with powerful campus and community constituencies, potentially increasing resources and institutional support for community engagement research and practice. Holland's (1999/2016) analysis revealed that scholars who learn to communicate their work in institutionally recognizable terms achieve greater success in advancing engagement initiatives. An especially relevant example of this approach is Weerts' (2019) framework mapping community engagement intersections with resource development, recruitment, and other institutional outreach goals. Second, strategic adaptation enables scholars to influence emerging conceptions that orient policy and practice, rather than ceding definitional authority entirely to institutional actors.

The community engagement literature reveals numerous examples of successful strategic adaptation. My argument builds upon this recognition among scholars that advancing engagement requires context-specific practical shifts from stipulated definitions developed over the past three decades. Rather than anchoring the field in stipulated definitions and related boundary work, scholars can develop frameworks that acknowledge definitional diversity while preserving analytical precision and commitments to core values.

The O&E DCMT: Outreach and Engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool

What does strategic adaptation look like in practice? The prevalence of the Carnegie definition of community engagement is likely due, as previously noted, to the dearth of alternative frameworks that have been operationalized in practice and implemented at scale. It is beyond the scope of this article to propose such a full-scale alternative; it may be possible, however, for a theory to be present, at least germinally, in the form of an artifact. To this end, I present the Outreach and Engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT)—a practical framework designed to enable scholars and practitioners to work productively with definitional diversity while maintaining analytical precision.

The DCMT consists of three integrated components: (1) inclusive definitions of "outreach" and "engagement" that avoid prescriptive language; (2) normative criteria of "reciprocity" (a quality of process) and "mutual benefit" (a quality of outcomes); and (3) a visual concept map showing varieties of outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles, representing zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors can find common ground. Together, these components provide a framework for navigating definitional diversity without sacrificing analytical precision or normative commitments.

Development Process and Stakeholder Dialogue

The DCMT emerged through iterative dialogue with diversely positioned campus leaders and stakeholders, including administrators; faculty from multiple disciplines;

recruitment, advancement, and public relations practitioners; community partners; and professional staff responsible for engagement program implementation. This collaborative development process proved essential for creating a framework that serves both scholarly and practical needs.

Through multiple iterations, the concept map component of the DCMT evolved to emphasize zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors could find common ground despite varying definitions and priorities. This evolution reflected growing recognition that productive engagement requires not definitional agreement but shared commitment to practices that advance both institutional and community interests.

Component 1: Inclusive Definitions

The first component of the DCMT provides broader and, most importantly, relatively neutral definitions that are inclusive of diverse institutional practices:

- *Outreach* refers to the ways in which university professionals (faculty and staff members) and students go beyond the university, geographically and organizationally, to contact, communicate with, and engage "external" audiences or constituencies.
- *Engagement* refers to collaborative efforts that involve university and nonuniversity partners in reciprocal and mutually beneficial endeavors. Public or community engagement often includes, extends, and deepens connections established through outreach.

These definitions deliberately avoid prescriptive language about what outreach and engagement "should" accomplish, instead describing what they characteristically involve. This approach enables institutional actors across diverse functional areas to recognize their work within the framework while preserving important distinctions between different types of university–community relationships.

Component 2: Normative Criteria

Activities that fall under the relatively value-neutral terms "outreach" and "engagement" can then be helpfully analyzed in terms of normative criteria or indicators of quality. Thus, the second component of the DCMT specifies two key concepts that enable assessment of engagement quality, again without imposing rigid standards:

- *Reciprocity* refers to a quality of *processes* based on equitable "give and take" between partners in a shared endeavor (in decision-making, resource contributions, etc.).
- *Mutual benefit* refers to *outcomes* that substantially address the goals and needs of all partners in a collaborative effort.

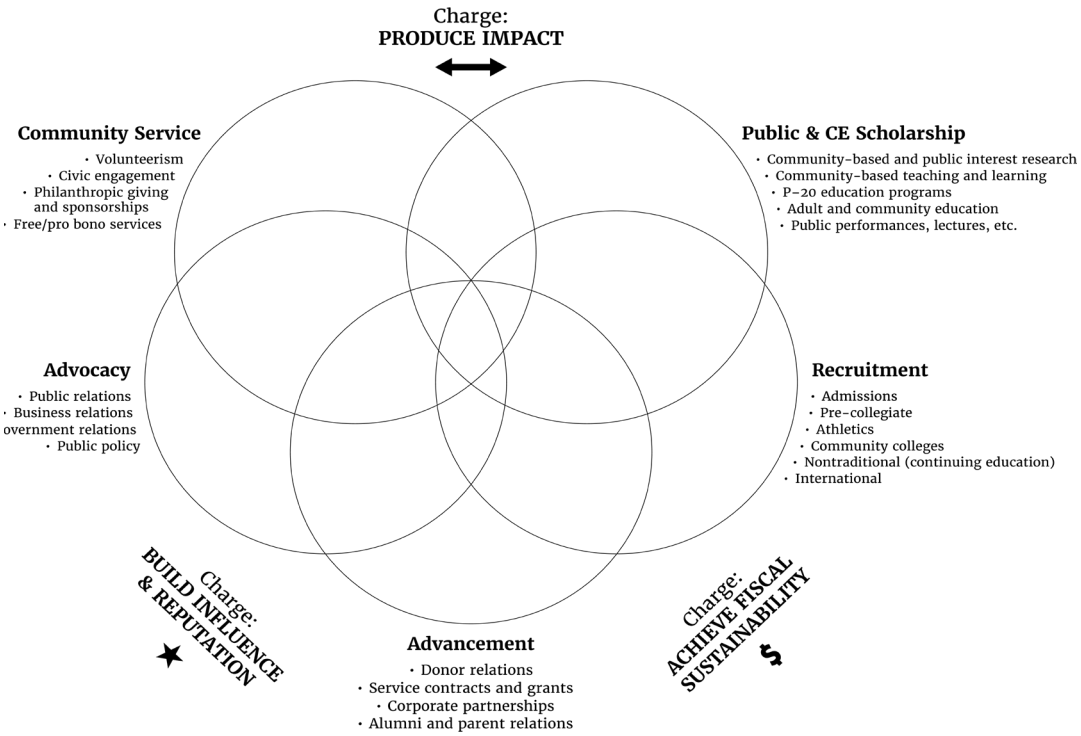
By distinguishing between process characteristics (reciprocity) and outcome characteristics (mutual benefit), the framework enables practitioners to assess and improve their work along multiple dimensions while acknowledging that different types of partnerships may emphasize different aspects of these concepts.

Component 3: Concept Map Diagram

The third component of the DCMT is the visual concept map diagram, which provides a typology of various, actually occurring outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles. Rather than prescribing specific definitions or hierarchical relationships, the concept map enables users to position their current activities within a broader ecosystem of university–community relationships and the terminologies that help constitute them.

The representation of three types of external engagement goals and functions (the activities' "institutional charge") includes an additional, explicitly normative element—albeit one that is plural/multipolar. Community service activities and engaged scholarship both aim primarily to "produce impact," meaning both the advancement of knowledge and learning alongside the substantive amelioration of public problems and transformation of problematic social and environmental conditions. The overriding aim of most recruitment and advancement efforts is to develop institutional resources, to ultimately "achieve fiscal sustainability." Advocacy and advancement efforts share, as their overriding goal, to "build influence and reputation." Thinking of these three "charges" as a triangle superimposed over the Venn diagram, one can see the fundamental divergence of activities represented in terms of the aims. This visualization enables one to differentiate activities even

Figure 1. Results From Evaluation of Educational Sessions



Note. This outreach and engagement concept map includes the Venn diagram showing varieties of outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles, with the primary institutional objective or "charge" appropriate to each indicated at the top middle (Produce Impact), lower right (Achieve Fiscal Sustainability), and lower left (Build Influence and Reputation). The concept map visually illustrates the zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors can find common ground despite varying definitions and priorities.

as the overlapping circles emphasize their constant colocation in geographic and social space.

This visual representation (Figure 1) has proven particularly valuable for practitioners and scholars working across internal institutional boundaries. By acknowledging definitional diversity while highlighting shared interests and complementary capabilities, the framework enables productive dialogue between actors who might otherwise remain isolated within their own terminological systems. The overlapping circles illustrate how activities traditionally categorized as distinct types of work can share common characteristics and contribute to broader institutional engagement goals, even as these goals remain distinct and to some extent in tension.

The concept map is presented above as Figure 1 within the text for purposes of discussion of the DCMT elements; the complete DCMT—including the inclusive definitions, the reciprocity and mutual benefit normative criteria, and the concept map—is presented as a complete one-page instrument in Appendix A.

Practical Applications of the O&E DCMT

The DCMT's dual emphasis on semantic and conceptual differentiation paired with strategic overlap enables multiple practical applications. For institutional planning, it provides a framework for assessing current capacity and identifying opportunities for enhancement without requiring abandonment of existing programs or terminology. For assessment purposes, it offers flexible criteria that can accommodate diverse approaches while maintaining standards for quality and community benefit. For professional development, it helps practitioners understand how their work connects to broader institutional engagement goals while maintaining their specific functional expertise.

Implications for Scholarship and Practice

The strategic adaptation approach and DCMT have important implications for both community engagement scholarship and institutional practice. The analysis demonstrates that boundary work approaches, although reflecting admirable normative commitments, prove counterproductive to goals of institutionalization and promotion of high-quality practice. By contrast, strategic adaptation enables productive engagement with institutional realities while maintaining core engagement values and commitment to transformational outcomes.

For researchers, the DCMT offers a more sophisticated approach to construct validity that acknowledges definitional variation while increasing analytical rigor. Rather than treating definitional diversity as a problem to be solved through boundary work, scholars can use the concept map to specify precisely what type of university–community relationship they are investigating. The concept map's emphasis on zones of strategic overlap also provides opportunities for developing more nuanced research questions that examine movement between different types of engagement, factors that influence institutional positioning, and outcomes associated with different approaches to university–community relationships.

For practitioners, the strategic adaptation approach provides practical guidance for navigating institutional pressures while maintaining commitment to authentic community partnership. The DCMT's emphasis on semantic differentiation paired with strategic overlap proves particularly valuable for practitioners working across institutional boundaries, enabling productive dialogue between actors who might otherwise remain isolated within their own terminological systems. From a professional development perspective, strategic adaptation suggests that community engagement professionals should develop skills in institutional translation and stakeholder communication rather than focusing primarily on defending normative definitions.

Conclusion

The semantic drift affecting community engagement terminology presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education scholarship and practice. Definitional precision remains important for research validity and normative clarity; however, the changing institutional landscape requires strategic adaptation rather than defensive boundary work. By engaging productively with evolving usage while maintaining analytical distinctions, community engagement scholars can influence emerging institutional practices while preserving the conceptual rigor necessary for meaningful scholarship.

The analysis presented here demonstrates the scope and complexity of current usage patterns; in this context, the DCMT provides a framework for navigating terminological diversity without sacrificing analytical precision. This approach recognizes that concepts derive their meaning from use and that scholarly influence depends on active participation in the conversations that shape institutional practice. The implications of this analysis and approach for the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement classification and the definition that it has made so pervasive are not explored here. Given the insights about practical implementation challenges and institutional relevance, the DCMT could help to inform future iterations of the application framework. In the meantime, it might help institutional leaders and practitioners charged with implementing the Carnegie framework at their universities or colleges to critically situate this implementation among other campus and community priorities, and to translate the process for various campus constituencies charged with diverse engagement functions.

The bottom line for community engagement scholars is this: Rather than viewing semantic drift as a threat to scholarly integrity, we would do better to embrace it as an opportunity to extend our influence while advancing both understanding and practice in university–community relationships. The strategic adaptation approach outlined here offers a path forward that maintains scholarly rigor while engaging productively with the institutional realities that shape contemporary higher education. The alternative—policing boundaries, discounting or condemning engagement practices at variance with stipulated definitions—risks marginalizing community engagement scholars within their own institutions. Given the unprecedented challenges presently faced by public institutions and higher education, approaches to fostering shared purpose and strong alliances across external engagement functions are more important than ever.

About the Author

David E. Meens *is assistant vice chancellor for public and community-engaged scholarship and affiliate faculty in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. His research centers on the scholarship of engagement, drawing especially upon democratic theory and philosophy of education to examine issues of policy and practice in K–12 and higher education. He holds graduate degrees in education foundations and policy, political philosophy, and educational psychology from the University of Colorado system.*

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Appendix A: Outreach and Engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool

Outreach and Engagement (O&E) Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT)

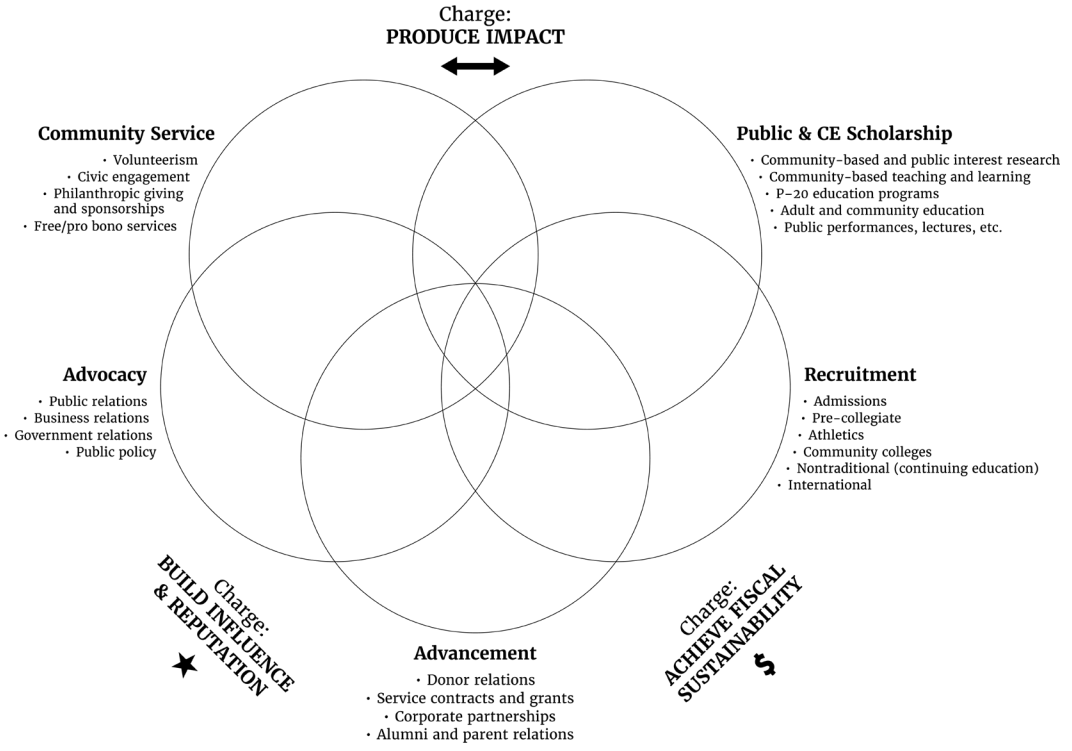
(Developed by David E. Meens and colleagues at University of Colorado Boulder, 2019)

Outreach refers to the ways in which university professionals (faculty and staff members) and students go beyond the university, geographically and organizationally, to contact, communicate with, and engage "external" audiences or constituencies.

Engagement refers to collaborative efforts that involve university and nonuniversity partners in *reciprocal* and *mutually beneficial* endeavors. Public or community engagement often includes, extends, and deepens connections established through outreach.

- *Reciprocity* refers to a quality of *processes* based on equitable "give and take" between partners in a shared endeavor (in decision-making, resource contributions, etc.).
- *Mutual benefit* refers to *outcomes* that substantially address the goals and needs of all partners in a collaborative effort.

Figure A1. Varieties of Outreach and Engagement Activities With Their Institutional Charge (Concept Map)



Note. This is the complete outreach and engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool, including the inclusive definitions of "outreach" and "engagement" and specifications of "reciprocity" (a quality of process) and "mutual benefit" (a quality of outcomes). The Venn diagram shows varieties of outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles. The concept map visually illustrates the zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors can find common ground despite varying definitions and priorities.