Assessing Michigan State University's Efforts to Embed Engagement across the Institution: Findings and Challenges

Crystal G. Lunsford, Robert L. Church, Diane L. Zimmerman

Abstract

This article describes how Michigan State University developed and implemented an institutional framework that identifies outreach and engagement as a scholarly, crosscutting function. These efforts sought to elevate the valuation of outreach and engagement across the institution and to ensure that outreach and engagement complemented the other professional responsibilities of faculty. The article also describes how the institution is beginning to assess the impact of those efforts on faculty attitudes and behavior. Preliminary findings suggest that while institution-level support is necessary, outreach and engagement will not flourish at research universities until academic units interpret and align the institutional framework with faculty efforts in ways appropriate to their disciplines. Efforts also must be taken to ensure that the faculty reward system encourages outreach and engagement.

Introduction

As a land-grant institution, Michigan State University (MSU) has a long tradition of engaging with the public to serve the social, economic, and political needs of Michigan residents and those beyond the state's borders. At the same time, MSU is also a research university whose cultural values are research based. In an effort to reaffirm and broaden its engagement commitments, along with research and teaching, the university began in the early 1990s to undertake initiatives directed at making outreach and engagement a more active, respected facet of faculty responsibility. This realignment process has sought to encourage greater faculty attention to engagement by creating a unified understanding of the importance of these activities and of what this work entails. Essentially, this process has been aimed at elevating the valuation of outreach and engagement efforts performed by faculty and others at the institution.

The university first approached this issue by clarifying that it wished to promote the idea that outreach is a scholarly activity closely integrated with faculty members' research and teaching, not a separate activity called "service." After nearly fifteen years of promoting university-wide outreach and engagement initiatives at MSU, institutional researchers used this goal as a benchmark to ask, "How broadly and deeply has MSU been able to alter its institutional culture to embed engagement across the university?" To assess the outcomes of these efforts, they analyzed qualitative data collected from the Outreach and Engagement Measurement Instrument (OEMI) and interviews conducted with faculty.

Over the past two years, more than a decade after the university began its realignment process, researchers at MSU have been collecting information about how faculty conduct and think about their outreach and engagement activities and how strongly they value them and feel that they are valued by their colleagues. A preliminary analysis of approximately seven hundred short narrative descriptions of outreach work provided by faculty in their responses to the OEMI in 2005 and of twenty-five in-depth interviews with faculty who reported extensive outreach activity has been completed. The results suggest that, while numerous faculty across all major units of the campus are involved in a significant amount of engagement activity, the potential for integrating outreach with other forms of scholarship, especially with research, is still not as widely appreciated as hoped. In addition, the understanding of what activities constitute outreach and the role of engagement as a vital part of the scholarly career varies widely by discipline and department. Based on these findings, it appears that the university can best improve its understanding of engagement as a scholarly activity by encouraging each academic unit to customize the definition of and expectations for outreach and engagement in ways appropriate to the disciplines underlying faculty expertise.

This article first summarizes the development of an institutional framework at MSU to serve as the basis for more fully embedding outreach and engagement[1] as an institutional function. The authors then describe the preliminary findings from current data collection efforts to assess the scope and depth of outreach and engagement efforts at the university and to understand faculty perceptions of how outreach work aligns with their scholarly activities. The article concludes with a look at the challenges drawn from the findings.

Developing an Institutional Framework

Defining outreach and engagement as a scholarly, crosscutting function: The first step of the realignment process was articulating an institutional definition of outreach and engagement and developing an agenda for administrative policies and structures to support this type of work. In 1992 the provost charged a committee of faculty and academic administrators representing departments and units across the university with the responsibility for articulating the intellectual foundation of outreach and engagement and developing recommendations for ways to strengthen outreach at the university. Over an eighteen-month period the committee met nearly every other week, interviewed more than a hundred MSU personnel, and conducted roundtables with external constituents to create a conception of outreach and engagement that would serve the needs of both the campus and communities external to the university. The committee's report, *University Outreach at Michigan State University: Extending Knowledge to Serve Society (Provost's Committee on University Outreach 1993)*, outlined its response to the provost's request. It has since become the foundation for the university's outreach and engagement momentum.

The committee began its work by confronting the normal understanding that service was a category of faculty work largely separate from teaching and research roles and that most viewed outreach as "another name for service." The committee deconstructed the service category, recognizing that it comprised service to the university (such as committee work), service to disciplinary or professional organizations (e.g., editing journals, planning conferences), volunteer service to the community (e.g., board service, fund raising), and service to communities and organizations where the faculty applied their scholarly expertise to help those entities address important issues.

It was from this fourth component of "service" that the committee developed its understanding of outreach. The committee's definition aligned with national efforts led by Ernest Boyer *(1990)* to recognize that scholarship was broader than traditional laboratory or library research and campus classroom teaching. Building on Boyer's insights, the committee understood that the activities it identified as outreach were not restricted to the service category, but were also aspects of teaching and research. They concluded that outreach is scholarly activity that cuts across the traditional areas of faculty responsibility and should be valued as such. Outreach, the

committee wrote, involves "generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of audiences in ways that are consistent with university and unit missions" *(Provost's Committee on University Outreach 1993)*. In other words, they identified outreach as integral to faculty work rather than as an additional activity distinct from "real scholarship."

Since the 1993 report, the Office of University Outreach and Engagement (UOE) and others at MSU have sought to embed outreach and engagement in the university's culture. Some highlights of this effort include creating a tool for planning and evaluating quality engagement, altering the primary faculty reward and recognition system, and increasing monetary support for outreach and engagement work. All of these initiatives have focused on reinforcing the definition of outreach and engagement as a scholarly, crosscutting function and have been directed at removing the structural and cultural barriers that faculty confront in engaging in this work.

Planning and evaluating outreach and engagement: In 1996 the UOE office, in conjunction with faculty and unit administrators, developed *Points of Distinction: A Guidebook for Planning and Evaluating Quality Outreach (POD; Committee on Evaluating Quality Outreach 1996, rev. 2000)*. This document builds on the institutional definition of outreach and engagement by providing a framework that academic units and individual faculty can use in planning, monitoring, and assessing outreach activities. POD seeks to foster and stimulate dialogue among administrators, faculty, and academic staff within individual academic units about planning outreach and engagement activities that are consistent with the unit's mission, values, and context. It provides recommendations to better enable unit directors to collaborate with faculty to encourage the values of outreach and engagement, including how to recognize and reward engagement efforts. Additionally, it assists units in developing strategies to communicate their outreach and engagement accomplishments to the MSU community and beyond.

The guidebook includes a matrix for faculty to draw on for developing and assessing their activities or projects. The four dimensions of the matrix—significance, context, scholarship, and impact—offer criteria for judging whether ongoing or potential outreach and engagement activities meet both the standards of scholarship and the needs of external constituents.

The dimension of *significance* refers to the importance and potential value of the work to those directly involved and to the public more broadly. *Context* asks whether an outreach activity is consistent with university and unit values and with stakeholder interests. It also asks faculty to consider whether the work is appropriate to their expertise, whether it is collaborative, the degree to which it is based on sound methodologies, and whether the work is adequately resourced.

Scholarship is defined in terms of the sources, application, generation, and utilization of knowledge—both the knowledge of the university scholar and that of the community partner/stakeholder. The scholarship dimension conveys the importance of outreach and engagement activities that are aligned with the traditional standards of scholarship, such as drawing on the existing literature base and employing sound

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methodologies, but also seeks to expand the meaning of scholarship to include creating scholarly products that involve and target audiences external to the university. The final dimension, *impact*, asks faculty to consider the goals of the intervention (for both individuals and for institutions), including the degree to which the objectives of the work were met and how the work affects their own scholarship. This dimension also asks them to consider whether their work involved capacity building, sustainability, and university-community relationships.

When the guidebook was published, the provost added a new emphasis on including outreach and engagement activities in the assessment of faculty accomplishments in her directions to unit leaders overseeing the promotion and tenure process and urged evaluators to use POD as a guide for doing so. The guidebook is included in the promotion and tenure packet. The UOE office has held periodic workshops for administrators on using the guidebook in the planning and assessment of outreach and engagement in their departments. To date, the guidebook has been used mostly to help faculty members make a persuasive case that their outreach work justifies consideration for promotion or merit increases. It has not been used extensively by academic units as they

consider unit-wide criteria for evaluating colleagues' work or developing unit goals.

Revising promotion and tenure guidelines: As stated repeatedly by professional associations and by faculty across institutions, the key to university culture change is ensuring greater recognition of outreach and engagement in the faculty reward structure. One purpose of *Points of Distinction* was to affect the reward process by helping faculty portray the complexity, the scholarly basis, and the impact of their work on external groups and on their own scholarship as they reported accomplishments to colleagues for purposes of merit promotion and tenure reviews. However, the promotion and tenure form itself needed to be revised as part of the realignment process. A group of faculty and academic administrators, several of whom had helped create POD, worked with the UOE office to rewrite the form. Their purpose was to recognize the crosscutting nature of outreach and engagement activity by integrating requests for data about outreach into each of the traditional categories—instruction, research/creative activities, and service.

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The revised form asks candidates to include both traditional and nontraditional teaching activities, whether for on-campus or off-campus audiences, under "instruction" rather than under the "service" category as training, workshops, seminars, and other forms of noncredit instruction. Under research and creative activities the new form asks faculty to indicate which of their scholarly activities or products include an outreach component, such as an innovative problem-solving strategy or methodology, and how the knowledge was applied and disseminated. Service is divided into two subcategories: within the academic community and to the broader community. The latter asks candidates to describe the actions taken, such as technical assistance and capacity building, the groups involved in the endeavor, the contributions of those involved, and evidence of the work's impact.

A new section was inserted to give faculty an opportunity to list evidence of other forms of scholarship in terms of the matrix described in POD and to explain how their scholarship cuts across the university's mission. The materials provided to unit leaders instruct them to structure their assessments of the faculty member's work across instruction, research/creative activity, and service by applying the matrix outlined in POD. This encourages unit leaders to identify outreach and engagement as a central part of the faculty's work.

Altering the promotion and tenure form and guidelines as well as providing indicators for evaluating faculty outreach and engagement work have been important steps. The new guidelines have now been in use for four years. The UOE institutional researchers now plan to look at the use of the new form by faculty and units. This would enable us to ascertain how faculty are responding to its engagement indicators to account for and capture this work and to better understand the importance of outreach among specific units.

Providing seed funding: Formal definitions of engagement as scholarly work and revised promotion and tenure documentation are more effective when they are accompanied by the resources needed to pilot and undertake new initiatives. At MSU, a seed funding program enables faculty to engage in community-based initiatives while also providing resources to the department to help cover additional administrative expenses. During 2005–2006, more than $450,000 was slated for distribution to faculty to aid in community-based research efforts that include an outreach component.

The current seed funding initiative is an expansion of the All University Outreach Grant (AUOG) program, a peer-reviewed competitive grant program that began at MSU in 1991. AUOG initially provided up to $15,000 in seed funding to faculty for outreach and engagement work. During the first five years, the grant program funded eighty-four projects. Several studies on the effectiveness of the AUOG program found that the limited size of the grants prevented most of the projects from developing a program capable of sustaining itself beyond the grant period. The program was revised in 1996 to award larger amounts to fewer projects and to implement a two-stage funding process that included an initial planning grant to increase the strength of the proposed projects. The current grant program combines funds

from multiple sources to increase per-project funding to $50,000. It has also strengthened the requirement that recipients submit proposals to external funders for additional support. This program parallels one administered by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies that supports more traditional forms of research.

Assessing the Scope and Depth of Outreach and Engagement

The outreach and engagement survey: Since its inception, the UOE office has collected exemplars or "best practices" of outreach and engagement activities to disseminate across MSU and to the broader public. Although these exemplars serve important functions, they do not further an inclusive, institutional understanding of the university's engagement accomplishments, nor do they provide units the kind of information needed for planning and monitoring engagement investment and focus. To help faculty and academic staff provide more systematic evidence of their engagement work, to make that documentation more relevant in reporting their individual performance, and to stimulate greater attention to engagement as a scholarly activity valued by the institution, UOE researchers developed the Outreach and Engagement Measurement Instrument (OEMI). Following several years of development and testing, the first university-wide pilot of the instrument was conducted during 2004–2005. More than 25 percent of the four thousand eligible faculty and academic staff responded.

The OEMI is a self-reported online survey of faculty and academic staff that collects primarily quantitative data on outreach and engagement activities *(Church et al. 2003)*. The instrument is designed to capture the percentage of MSU personnel effort expended on outreach and engagement, the topical areas of concern on which those activities focus, the forms taken by those activities (e.g., outreach research, technical assistance, noncredit and off-campus credit instruction, experiential learning and service-learning, clinical service, public events and information), the locations of activities, the numbers of participants, and the amount of external funding and in-kind support. The survey also asks respondents to provide qualitative data about one or two specific outreach and engagement projects or activities. These data provide a base from which the UOE office develops rich descriptions of university outreach work to share with the public.

The OEMI allows us to do several different types of analysis based on the self-reported data provided by respondents. For each area of concern (e.g., community and economic development, health and health care), we can determine the total amount of faculty effort in terms of full-time equivalency (FTEs) and salary devoted to it. For example, the 2004 data indicate that the equivalent of 22.3 full-time faculty and academic staff positions (FTEs) across the university, representing $1,509,636 in salary, were devoted to outreach related to K-12 education. These data can also be analyzed by form. Nearly 40 FTEs were dedicated to public events and information and 81.89 FTEs to noncredit classes and programs in 2004. The number of people directly touched though outreach activities can be analyzed by area of concern or form of outreach. The number of faculty and academic staff who reported that their work had an international, urban, or diversity focus can also be calculated. Nearly 600 of the 829 faculty who reported they had been involved in outreach indicated that their work sought to promote diversity. The revenue generated for both the university and external collaborators can also be determined. In addition to reporting the data by area of concern and form, data can be analyzed by college and department.

Quantitative data collected from the 2004 pilot were aggregated and given to all unit chairpersons, deans, and university administrators. In addition to being available to serve the planning and assessment needs at the unit and university levels, these data help illustrate the contributions the university is making to its external constituents as well as the contribution that outreach activity makes to the institution. For example, administrators were provided aggregate data at the unit level and institution-wide data on FTE and salary investment of faculty and the revenue produced for both the university and partners. Data have also been mined for use in accreditation reports. The quantitative data collected in this survey, like those collected for research and teaching productivity, provide measures of unit effort and accomplishment in outreach and engagement that are included in the university's annual planning profile. The planning profile is used as one basis for allocation of the budget each year. As data on outreach are accumulated over a number of years, departments and other academic units can trace the pattern of work, including whether it is growing or waning, on what issues it is focused, and changes in the outside revenue it attracts. The OEMI helps units

direct their outreach work in ways that create synergy among individual faculty efforts to yield significant impact on individuals and organizations beyond the academy.

The researchers also conducted analyses of the project descriptions provided by 656 respondents to the open-ended questions on the OEMI. The findings suggest that faculty have widely varying opinions as to what constitutes an outreach and engagement activity. Most prominently, they differed on purpose and scope of activities, the involvement and role of external constituents, the respondent's role, and impact on the external and internal constituents. Of course, variation was expected due to the individual training and expertise that faculty bring to their work; even so, the analysis of these descriptions suggests that faculty did not limit their perception of what is meant by "outreach and engagement work" to the institutional definition.

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These data enabled us to identify the degree to which the project or activity descriptions provided by faculty indicated collaborative work. Of the total number of respondents, 484 (74%) indicated collaboration with at least one partner external to the university. To determine the level of collaborative engagement with the public based on the descriptions provided, we developed six indicators: joint planning and assessment, needs assessment, sustained relationships (two years or more), future plans for sustainability, dissemination of knowledge to the public, and community/partner capacity building. We coded data in accordance with these six indicators. "Highly engaged" was defined as meeting four or more of these indicators. Of the 656 respondents, 187 (29%) were identified as being highly engaged with individuals or entities outside the university. Sixty-two percent of highly engaged respondents (n = 115) also provided evidence to suggest a relationship between their work and scholarly activity. More respondents indicated production of scholarly work in terms of intellectual property (52%) than publications and presentations (30%). In addition to scholarly impact, 137 of the highly engaged respondents reported nonscholarly impacts or outcomes.

Faculty interviews: Supplementing the data from the OEMI, findings from faculty interviews conducted by the authors using a tested protocol indicate similar results. The primary purpose of the faculty interviews was to gain a more nuanced view of the work faculty identify as outreach and engagement. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six faculty and specialists representing multiple fields and disciplines from the natural and social sciences. The interviews ranged from 50 to 105 minutes. The primary criteria used to select the interview sample from OEMI responses were the social concerns the respondent's work targeted and the amount of outreach effort reported. Respondents chosen for interviews had reported spending at least ten percent of their total effort on outreach and engagement activities. Secondary criteria such as primary discipline or field, number of participants involved, revenue, and impact of the work were used to ensure diversity of the sample.

A preliminary analysis of the interviews indicates that most faculty perceive their outreach and engagement work as valued more by the institution, broadly defined, than within their disciplines and academic fields and, for many, the units in which they are located. Many faculty reported that their outreach and engagement work supports the rhetoric of the university but does not necessarily lead to the rewards and recognition associated with traditional forms of scholarship. Many interviewees reported that being at MSU, with its land-grant mission, had significantly influenced how they identified their work and its relationship to the public. These interviewees felt they had an obligation to engage with constituents external to the university. However, faculty reported that university policies, particularly at the unit level and including the promotion and tenure process, did not necessarily suggest that their work was as highly valued as traditional forms of research and scholarship. Few reported any unit-level barriers to engaging in this type of work, but many indicated that the unit did not support and facilitate their efforts. For those who reported that the unit was supportive, they generally described this support in terms of administrative support. Many of the tenure-stream faculty without full tenure reported that the multiple pressures they faced, including publishing in top-tier journals, inhibited their outreach activities. For most, these journals did not favor research that had an outreach component. Others perceived that generating research funds to support their outreach and engagement activities was difficult. Even those who were most successful at integrating

outreach and engagement with their other work reported that disciplinary boundaries accounted for the devaluing of their activities. However, several faculty indicated that they have recently seen disciplinary forums, such as meetings of professional organizations, include sessions on outreach-related activity.

There were substantial differences in how faculty across the natural and social sciences conceived their outreach and engagement work in relation to the institutional definition. Within the social sciences, differences among faculty varied by disciplinary affiliation. Faculty who identified with traditional disciplines, such as anthropology, reported their engagement activities in terms of service, either to professional societies or to community-based organizations; some conducted community-based research. Their research interests primarily influenced their outreach and engagement work rather than the reverse. In turn, their outreach and engagement activities influenced their teaching in terms of providing them with practical knowledge that they would not have obtained in other ways, but it did not influence the type of courses they taught or whom they taught. Thus, it appears that faculty in the traditional social science disciplines identified relationships between the work they labeled as outreach and engagement and the other work they performed on behalf of the university, but they did not necessarily see those relationships as integral to their research and teaching responsibilities. The majority identified outreach and engage-ment as an additional task they performed due to their commitment to the public good, rather than as something intertwined with the responsibilities of their positions.

Faculty in the applied fields of the social sciences, such as urban planning and community psychology, perceived outreach and engagement as fundamental to their work and scholarly pursuits. Their outreach and engagement work was intertwined with their research and teaching activities. For example, the majority taught courses with an experiential or service-learning component. All of this group of respondents reported that they had produced scholarly products that assessed or described their engagement work and that these activities served as the primary basis for their scholarly publications. The work of this group was most closely aligned with the institutional definition of outreach and engagement.

Faculty in the natural sciences identified outreach and engagement as integral to their academic and professional responsibilities. They, even more than the social scientists, believed that it was integral to their work as scientists. However, they did not, for the most part, identify it as a crosscutting scholarly activity, but rather as a form of service. Most often they participated in activities that sought to convey their scientific knowledge to the public, either to inform the public or to increase public interest in the sciences. They also reported such other activities as recruiting students into the fields of math or science by engaging with K-12 teachers and students. These faculty primarily participated in engagement activities developed and run by the unit or by faculty external to the college rather than initiating and seeking funds for their own outreach efforts. They reported that their engagement activities were entirely separate from their research and did not necessarily influence their university teaching; however, many reported that teaching at the university had provided them with the instructional skills needed for assisting the public.

These qualitative data indicate that social and natural scientists perceive their outreach and engagement work in ways that vary by disciplinary affiliation. The data collected also suggest that the institutional framework for outreach and engagement aligns best with faculty working in the applied fields of the social sciences. Perceptions of faculty within the more traditional social science fields and the natural sciences vary in terms of identifying outreach as integral to their professional responsibilities or as a service activity. This finding does not necessarily mean that the original efforts to develop an institution-wide framework and definition of engagement were unnecessary; however, it does suggest that deeper efforts must be targeted at helping units conceptualize outreach and engagement in relation to faculty scholarly work.

Learning from the Findings—Challenges to Come

The steps MSU has taken to embed engagement as a valued activity that complements the scholarly work of faculty have yielded positive results and have highlighted some of the challenges the institution continues to face. While preliminary, the data collected as part of the OEMI and initial findings from the faculty interviews suggest that the greatest challenge to these

efforts is embedding the commitment to outreach and engagement at the unit level.

The findings suggest that the boundaries shaping disciplines significantly influence how faculty define and value outreach work and how they see it fitting with their other scholarly activities. To increase the amount and effectiveness of outreach work, the university must ensure that the reward system reflects the expectation that faculty will participate. This system is largely controlled at the academic unit level. No matter how enthusiastically institutional leaders proclaim the importance of using scholarly expertise to improve the lives of those beyond the campus, faculty members are judged on criteria defined largely by their disciplinary or professional peers. Institutional leaders can declare that outreach is a scholarly activity, but faculty have to understand how, or whether, that phrase applies to what their discipline or professional organization considers scholarship. That understanding must be developed at the unit level and incorporated into the assessment criteria that the unit applies when evaluating the work of its colleagues. Unit directors, therefore, need to collaborate with the faculty and academic staff to develop a conception of outreach and engagement that best utilizes their disciplinary or professional expertise while meeting the needs of that unit's external constituents.

Units not only have to develop definitions of outreach and outreach productivity appropriate to their unit to help in the assessment of their colleagues' work; they also need to develop a process for specifying how they expect the unit as a whole to fulfill the outreach part of its mission. Outreach has generally been something that individual faculty choose to do or not; the unit may be indifferent as to which of those choices is made. While outreach has usually been considered a "good" thing, most units have not yet adopted unit goals for outreach accomplishments—nothing comparable to the number of seats filled, number of graduate students recruited, number of articles published, or number of external dollars received. Outreach does not lend itself quite so easily to such quantifiable goals, but because of the university's seriousness about ensuring that its scholarly expertise is used to benefit the public, units must find ways to specify their contributions to that goal. Furthermore, like definitions of individual outreach activity, these plans for fulfilling the outreach mission must be appropriate to the disciplinary and professional traditions of each unit—outlining the steps necessary to serve the

external constituents of that unit and the expertise and methodologies for doing so. As outreach and engagement is tailored to the specific circumstances of each academic unit and thus more deeply embedded into its specific mission, it is more likely that faculty will engage in outreach and be recognized and rewarded appropriately for efforts that support the outreach component of the institutional mission.

Outreach administrators face two interrelated challenges. First, they need to encourage individual academic units to modify their institutional definitions of outreach so that the members of each unit fully understand how the definition applies to their own scholarship. Second, they need to help each unit plan to accomplish the outreach goals that are part of its mission statement. Both activities are ultimately directed at clarifying how faculty are expected to contribute to the unit and institutional outreach missions and what criteria are to be used in assessing the quality of those contributions. Only when definitions, assessment criteria, and unit plans for fulfilling the outreach mission are made specific and appropriate to individual units can outreach be truly embedded in the university culture.

Note

1. In the 1990s MSU chose the word "outreach" to delineate its work directly benefiting external audiences. The work conveyed by the term was defined as scholarly, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial, though many view the term as implying a one-way delivery of expertise and knowledge. In 2004 MSU added the term "engagement" to its language to signify that mutuality.

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About the Authors

• Crystal G. Lunsford is a graduate research assistant with Michigan State University's Office of University Outreach and Engagement and a doctoral student in the College of Education. Prior to attending MSU, she obtained a master's degree in sociology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

• Robert L. Church is vice provost emeritus of university outreach and engagement and professor emeritus, educational administration, at Michigan State University. He has given leadership and voice to the numerous measurement instruments in higher education and is an advocate for finding measures that have equivalents in the teaching and research missions of the academy that attest to the scholarly nature of outreach. He holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University in the history of American civilization.

• Diane L. Zimmerman is director of administration in Michigan State University's Office of Outreach and Engagement and is the director of MSU's Center for the Study of University Engagement. She provides leadership to the working team that has developed and now implemented the online, faculty-based Outreach and Engagement Measurement Instrument (OEMI). Over the last decade, Zimmerman has been involved with the ongoing national conversations and has given presentations related to evaluating and measuring scholarly outreach. She holds a Ph.D. in higher education administration from Michigan State University.