BUILDING THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT

Foundational Ideas and Future Directions

Edited by

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I am a scholar-administrator whose doctorate is in higher education, whose faculty home is in peace and conflict studies, and whose primary administrative appointment is in the office of research. From these positions, I focus on the changing nature of faculty work and higher education, particularly as it relates to innovations in higher education, of which community engagement is one.

From this vantage point, I see far more future directions than can be articulated in a short essay. However, I focus on several confluences that bring us to a new point with regard to how we think about scholarship in higher education—and the effect this will have on community engagement. The first confluence I see is in newly revitalized commitments to social equity and social justice within higher education and across the world more broadly. This results from the emergence of (“next”) generations of scholars who are entering the field and taking leadership positions. We know from Trower’s (2006) work and our own observations that these scholars are more diverse than previous generations and expect to use their academic employment as a platform for social justice, to work on the big and wicked problems, and to have a life of the heart and the mind. We are all, early-career and late-career scholars and staff, contextualized with the social, political, and natural environments of our times—which appear more concerning and pressing than ever. Within this context, and with these identities, the next generation of scholars is producing new forms of scholarship, not to make but to remake the academy in this new context, as Rhoades and his students (2008) have discussed.

The second confluence is innovative technology. The next decade and beyond will necessarily be shaped, and is already being shaped, by rapid, expansive, and disruptive technological innovations. Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, have provided platforms for every voice...
and view. Across the globe, we have new, technology-assisted ways to form communities among people who will never meet in person, but who feel attachment and affiliation as new ways are discovered to organize geographically disparate individuals into unified, collective, and booming voices.

In tandem with the profile and expectations of next-generation scholars, new technology is intersecting with and shaping scholarly communications and organizing in higher education as well. For example, scholars who do not identify as community engagement scholars are arguing for pluralistic forms of scholarship (see Aguinis, Shapiro, Antonacopoulou, & Cummings, 2014). That is, one person’s scholarly aims for impact may include contributions not only in his or her disciplinary community but also to specific communities that require different types of artifacts. This matters for community engagement because factors undergoing change in the world around us—personal identities; the social, political, and environmental contexts; and the technological revolution—are also entering into the consciousness and expectations of scholars beyond the community engagement community. To my understanding, this means that community engagement scholars, administrators, and practitioners are not the only ones challenging notions about who has knowledge, what constitutes knowledge and the forms it takes, who and what knowledge is for, and what the aims of using knowledge are. Community engagement scholars have been having this conversation for a long time, but now there are many more and different voices also arguing that coresearchers, coinquirers, coauthors, and peer reviewers assessing quality and impact can and should extend beyond those with doctorates. I expect to see widening of conversations (i.e., manuscripts in article or book form) among more scholars about nontraditional forms of scholarship: videos, programs, blogs, policy change, white papers, datasets, and more not yet even imagined.

I expect that community engagement scholars will continue to adopt and adapt methods to expand participation, collaboration, and shared and transparent decision-making. As we know, often those who need most to share their voices cannot or will not come to physical meetings. As one aspect of this expansion, I expect to see community engagement adopting new forms of technology to operationalize our ideals. This essay addresses a handful of those I see on the horizon.

I expect that our publishing will continue to be transformed beyond the initial forays started by Imagining America and Community–Campus Partnerships for Health. In addition to more free and open access journals, I expect to see other types of publishing platforms for knowledge produced through community–campus collaboration. I expect they will not be static, but will allow for comments to be shared among readers and authors to facilitate the exchange of ideas, links to other important ideas and artifacts,
and revisions as they are needed based on new findings or refined understandings. I expect to see the expansion of ways to publish all high-quality contributions, much like PLoS ONE, which has led the way in the sciences to maintain rigorous standards for peer review for quality; to increase visibility through online searchability; to speed up publication; and, most importantly, to increase acceptances so that all quality scholarship is published (including replication studies and negative results), not just a select few. I see the development of preprint servers that rapidly mint a digital object identifier (DOI) so that work can be cited and authorship can be recognized (see Ball et al., 2017).

I don’t know all that the future holds, but I know that in the past 20 years, we have seen previously unimagined innovations that have changed the way we think, communicate, make decisions, and take actions. These include iPhone, iPad, PayPal, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Lyft and Uber, Airbnb, cryptocurrency, and self-driving cars. I expect that innovations will be instrumental to achieving our aims to remake the academy in ways that allow us to actually transform higher education to become more reciprocal, more mutually beneficial, and more asset based in its relationships on campus and in the community.

References


Grounded in principles of mutuality, diversity and inclusion, integrity, and purpose, this book is a must-read for campus leaders. With an all-star group of scholars, this book synthesizes wisdom to inform our engagement with society. Colleges and universities cannot meet their missions of developing critical thinking, leadership, and moral citizens without this type of engagement in our communities. —Adrianna Kezar, Dean’s Professor of Leadership, University of Southern California; Codirector, Pullias Center; and Director, Delphi Project

The editors have done all of higher education a significant favor in curating this remarkable collection of classic essays. Enriched with commentaries from some of today’s thought leaders and inspiring practitioners, this volume truly sets a foundation for reclaiming the public and democratic purposes of higher education. —Paul C. Pribbenow, President, Augsburg University

Community engagement has evolved as a respected field and now occupies a seat at the academic table. In the past, this work had often been relegated to the institutional fringes of higher education, its practitioners marginalized, and the work often portrayed as service, not scholarly. Today, higher education community engagement is a dynamic and continually evolving field of scholarship and practice that carries ever-increasing academic respect. This book contributes to the ever-under-construction edifice by presenting a scaffolding of the scholarship that has been part of the building process, documenting and analyzing the past, speculating about the future, and framing a continuing conversation about and for the field.