Academic Engagement in Public and Political Discourse

Notes from Academic Engagement Brownbag #2

Tuesday February 18, Johnson Rooms, North Campus, 12:00-1:30pm

Brownbag Focus:
How does one pursue an academic career that includes public and political engagement? In this second of three brownbag lunches, we explored the risks and opportunities (both internal and external). How do they differ by stage of career or discipline? What are the challenges of engagement, including personal, career, and political ones, and what are the options for meeting them? How can one navigate the multiple roles that are part of the engagement process?

These questions appear to be top of mind, for both academics and in the media more broadly, as evidenced by two recent articles. The first was a column by Nicholas Kristof, published in the *New York Times* on February 16, 2014:

> My Sunday column is about the unfortunate way America has marginalized university professors–and, perhaps sadder still, the way they have marginalized themselves from public debate." http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/15/bridging-the-moat-around-universities/

The second was an article Rob Jenkins, published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on February 17, 2014:

> "We Have to Protect Ourselves… If anything, faculty members should be a bit more paranoid about social media" http://chronicle.com/article/We-Have-to-Protect-Ourselves/144775/

These opinion pieces and the associated comments seeded our discussion.

Seven central themes emerged from the discussion at this second brownbag lunch:

Theme #1: **There are many benefits to being at a public institution**. There is still an ethos of having a responsibility to be part of the broader public dialogue, and to contribute in a way that raises the debate and makes it constructive, versus pundits who purposefully create dissension. We are here to generate and share knowledge, to create a better world.

Challenge: Oftentimes, we restrict ourselves to speaking to other researchers and to students on highly narrowed topics. We might be concerned that our discussion of controversial issues could be misconstrued and potentially damaging to the University.

Options for meeting this: It is important that the University that does not penalize faculty for speaking out in public. If our first impulse is to sanction, that is a dangerous position. We would never be able to speak outside our narrowly defined expertise. For example, is Noam Chomsky, an expert on linguistics, outside his expertise when he speaks on foreign policy? As a society, we are too quick to sanction. Everybody has said something they regret. Yet, we are not always sympathetic to this. For example, with implicit racism/stereotypes,

inappropriate comments often pop out. We should be engaging, discussing, and unravelling the underlying biases– rather than instantly sanctioning - which further subverts such biases.

Theme #2: Academics have an important role to play in improving public and political discourse. The more that policy decisions are influenced by broader society, the greater the imperative for us to be translating our expertise and informing decision-making processes. Our technical expertise and our skills in interpreting evidence make us valuable. In doing so, we can also move our agenda forward. As an example wellness concepts were included in healthcare reform through the advocacy of public health researchers.

Challenge: Policy advocacy is more relevant in some disciplines (i.e., law, public policy, planning, public health), where it's our job to consider societal needs. Other areas, like history, are more decoupled. For interdisciplinary work, this may result in a conflict of norms. For a historian working in public policy, she could lose her authority by becoming too close, rather than maintaining an objective distance.

Options for meeting this: The culture of our department is more important than the culture of our discipline. Thus, we can align our actions with the norms of our department. For example, in sociology, more public discussion results in higher status; while in Psychology public discussion is not valued. It is easier for us to move the culture of engagement within our department rather than trying to move an entire discipline, especially post-tenure.

Theme #3: There are risks from public engagement, particularly for those in public institutions. One risk of being at a public institution is that we appear to have less privacy. For example, anyone can make Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for research contracts here, but not in private institutions. Many things that we do are, in fact, public. For example, things that we have said in class could be misconstrued in another context. And anything that we write under our university email may be FIOAed.

Options for meeting this: The Jenkins article speaks to this blurring between professional and private roles. He advises separating our personal from your private (computers, email accounts, blogs, etc.). However, as a result, public engagement activities would not be shown on our CV. What is the place for public and policy engagement work, if it's not reflected as part of our professional work?

Option for meeting this: Contrary to Jenkins advice, we are often blogging/ speaking on our professional work as there is a direct relationship between our faculty position, research, personal interests, and the issues we study. For example, in many professional schools we get involved with policy issues. If we study public health and obesity, how can we not get deeply involved with issues that have such an impact for society?

Senior faculty still advise junior faculty to undertake such activities, but with caution. If you're going to get involved in public issues these don't need to be hugely controversial, where much of what we say might be reused beyond our control. We need to recognize these risks and deal with these objectively. How much risk are we willing to accept? How will we manage those risks? We need to rethink our activities, if these risks become too great. If we're beginning to stray into areas where we're being judged on our opinions and it becomes damaging, we need to consider pulling back. While we encourage faculty to become engaged, we should do it as carefully and thoughtfully as how we approached our tenure.

Theme #4: Once we have tenure, we have the freedom, opportunity and perhaps obligation to engage in public discourse. The purpose of tenure is to provide protection to speak truth to power, especially in our area of expertise, without fear of retribution. This is part of our public service. When becoming a full professor, we have much more freedom and opportunity do more of what we desire: write a book, reinvent ourselves as scholars, or become more engaged in policy/public debates.

Challenge: Academic freedom of speech is not an absolute right. Having tenure does not give us carte blanche to say anything anywhere anytime. We may not be qualified to speak on certain issues. Polemic statements would also be outside of this. Finally, teaching is a privilege, not a right. If we violate the conditions under which this privilege is granted, then it may be rescinded.

Option for meeting this: Northwestern University has an electrical engineering professor who, as soon as he was granted tenure, became a vocal Holocaust denier. So, Northwestern has defined the conditions under which he can voice these opinions. If he raises the Holocaust in the classroom, he's fired. If he speaks publicly about the Holocaust, he has to identify himself as a professor of electrical engineering. Allowing this professor to speak publicly while requiring him to state his (lack of) qualifications appears be a reasonable balance.

However, such rules might make us nervous. Could climate change be next? University policy would have to specify how such decisions are made regarding what we can or cannot say.

Theme #5: We have the opportunity and obligation to teach our students to reason through an issue.

Challenge: Students' 'feelings' seem to be replacing the balance of facts; they do not look at evidence like we do. With the prevalence of Photoshop, they don't believe photographs. Evidence is to be distrusted. They don't seem interested in critically disaggregating the argument and how conclusions are arrived at. This lack of critical reasoning has affected debate both inside the classroom and in the public more broadly. Yet, we're failing if our students cannot think critically; this is an indictment of us. And our authority in teaching people to think critically is more limited, beyond the university.

Options for meeting this: Perhaps we could examine how critical reasoning can be taught. Should we be teaching society what is 'evidence', how to weigh an argument, claims/ evidence? Could we do this in a NPR interview or perhaps in a tweet?

Theme #6: We do our studies with a normative bent, to varying degrees by discipline.
We study the way that the world works and why? We might also choose to study more normative questions: How ought the world work?

Challenge: Some disciplines that deal with normative questions are already working with these issues. However, while we may be excellent with descriptive questions, we may not be necessarily good with the normative questions and the broader issues surrounding these. For example, biologists are biophyllic, yet don't understand that most people don't care about the environment. Thus, in making certain assumptions about their audiences' values, they undermine the credibility of their messaging.

Options for meeting this: We need to differentiate our audience(s) and determine how we should be best engaging with each. For an NSF proposal, the audience is clearly the evaluation committee. For policy questions on sugary drinks, our approach would be different for a regulatory review committee than for a public discussion of this on Fox News. The objectives for each engagement will determine who we choose as our audiences and how we craft our message. Engagement is not merely a marketing and communication campaign: I'm right, you're wrong, and will change your mind. Public engagement processes require faculty to go the next step in listening and talking.

Options for meeting this: The University could provide encouragement, advice, and training to make academics more effective in speaking with various audiences. We should be able to communicate with folks outside our home discipline, in a straightforward manner. Our writing should also be straightforward; it doesn't need to be turgid and jargony.

Theme #7: The institutions of research are changing around the issue of engagement and impact. The NSF has introduced 'broader impacts' requirements, to reward engaged research. Engagement has the ability to enrich our scholarship; these may be virtuously constitutive. In linking our research/scholarship with public issues, we can bridge science/policy gaps and acquire skills and experience with such issues.

Challenge: Despite this, the advice to new faculty is inherently conflicted. Look 'policy relevant', but not 'policy engaged'. Yet, neither is defined. Do great research - and engagement activities, even though we won't respect you for it. These competing expectations are compounded by an 'arms race' and escalation of 'broader impacts'. An assistant professor is worried that giving normative policy recommendations (i.e., levy taxes on sugary drinks) pre-tenure makes her seem that she isn't a 'serious academic'. Any time away from her research is perceived as detracting from her research. And communicating her research to a public audience is considered to a downgrade in her intellectualism. Tenure committees are asking: What kind of academic do we want?

Options for meeting this: First and foremost, we should focus on doing very good work and establish our credibility amongst our peers. By publishing in the best journals first, we become immune to criticism. The focus should be on our research and not on public debates. Post-tenure, we can write our novel and the popularized versions.

Options for meeting this: The use of all media is in flux. In information studies, more media are becoming recognized and are credited as being a scholarly contribution. The tenure evaluation framework is in flux. The funding agencies are in flux. Things are changing rapidly.

Options for meeting this: The University has multiple communities with multiple missions– research colleagues vs. tenure committees vs. media vs. fundraising - in an 'ecology' of knowledge generation and dissemination. Thus, not everyone needs to be good at doing everything. Some are best at basic research. Others are better at translating that research. Others are better at policy advice. We should consider these various opportunities, within this ecology.

Participants offered the following as discussion points for further discussion:

- What are multiple roles (outside of research track)? How can we consider becoming involved in these various roles, at a community/ecology level?

- Could we establish a Centre on campus to enable faculty to be more effective in their engagement activities? How do we help/teach faculty to do this well?
- Times are changing. It is time to make ourselves more available for public/policy discussions?

The third and last Brownbag of the school year will take place on Wednesday, March 26, 2014, 12:00-1:30, at the Michigan League, Michigan Room, 2nd floor. The central theme will be: What should be the role of academics in public and political discourse?

We will ask normative questions about the rules of academia, the needs of society, what to do if they do not mesh and how can we promote more successful engagement in public discourse? In an increasingly complex and scientifically challenging world, how should we engage the public and political process? What are the rules of tenure, formal and informal, and how should they change and how should they stay the same? How should young scholars manage their careers in ways that may differ from those of their more senior colleagues?

You may register here: http://graham.umich.edu/events/brownbag-series-public-engagement-academic-scholar