

Academic Engagement in Public and Political Discourse

Notes from Academic Engagement Brownbag #3

Wednesday, March 26, 2014, 12:00-1:30,
Michigan League, Michigan Room, 2nd floor

Brownbag Focus:

The theme of this conversation is: *What should be the role of academics in public and political discourse?* Building on conversations in the first 2 brownbags (notes of which you can view here: <http://graham.umich.edu/events/brownbag-series-public-engagement-academic-scholar>) we 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?

Five separate group discussions explored these questions in depth. We concluded by discussing the overarching themes in a combined session.

OVERARCHING THEMES: HOW CAN WE PROMOTE MORE SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT?

The answer to this broader normative question is that 'it depends' on our area of research, type of scholarship, discipline – i.e., sustainability (broadly applied) vs. mathematics (much less applied).

When? Typically, engagement is not valued in tenure process. For earlier career academics, the danger is that broader engagement could take us away from our research. We appear less serious, because of how we have to communicate, and it considered distracting to our core research. If we want people to become tenured and engaged, how is it supposed to magically happen after tenure? There is a disconnect between pre- and post-tenure expectations.

Rather than being distracting, however, research and engagement may be mutually enhancing if undertaken as parallel activities. For many of us, it's a personal agenda. We do this because we want to have a broader voice in these issues. It's a personal investment/reward. For example, in surveying experts' beliefs about climate change and their role in policy development, one researcher was able to write a top tier research article, a summary for practitioners, and media articles for the public while also contributing to broader discussions regarding adaptation and mitigation strategies. This engaged approach towards research resolves any potential disconnects between academic and public personas.

It's fine that our core tenure standards are around research and scholarship; we should police that baseline. However, we should get away from the idea that these other engagement activities are negative. We can still maintain good research and engage. We can do both. Yes, we have to manage the balance, to protect our core work. On the other hand, if we do work that has great relevance to public, we should value that too. We need to protect safe space for that work that has intellectual merit, that is not immediately publicly relevant. We need to value all these modes of research and engagement.

Why? There should be a clearer mutual benefit, rather than a 'duty'. For example, engagement could be framed as an exciting opportunity to extend and leverage our research agenda. We can convey value by other means. NSF is now asking for 'impact' statements, to hook into larger engagements.

We purport to support inter-disciplinarity. And yet, we don't seem to value it in our tenure/ promotion process. We currently don't train, mentor, and support this. If it's something we value, we have to value it.

Where? Public discourse is not valued at department or discipline level, but is valued at the university level and is 'put on the record'. This creates another disconnect between the department that grants tenure and the university that values engagement.

The measures of impact could be changed at the department level. However, Regents and letter writers will have to buy into revised tenure criteria. Our revised ideas on 'impact' could include alternative standards of quality, which might be easier for some activities (i.e., writing for high profile, non-academic publications) than others (i.e., blogosphere).

How? If we think that engagement is a good idea, how do we train others to do it when we're not even sure how to do it ourselves? The School of Public Health hired a Hollywood producer to train faculty to do TED talks. While it may be easy to scoff at creating a 'Hollywood' version of our research, there are lessons to be learned in how to create an intuitively accessible and persuasive narrative of our research.

At professional meetings in NASA, they help you communicate your to broader audiences. It's a competition, motivating people to create a good storyline and they have incentivized it. This is good venue for young scholars. Could our professional societies help us do this, by offering an award for public communication of science?

Our individual schools are also looking for stories of research, to publish these in broader media. These point to the value of these communications/ advertisements to the institution Translating what we do in our labs into the public sector is part of the accountability of the university to the public. They want us to be doing this. How many faculty starting companies to commercialize their research, translating ivory tower into the real world, helping the public sector? However, researchers are not encouraged to be involved. It's great you're in the media, but where are your publications? It's not going to be a zero sum. The best we can hope for is that it's not seen as negative. If you can overlap your research with engagement, that's the even better.

Universities should be encouraging and supporting these activities. TED talk coaches, etc. We need to be careful that we don't add even more expectations, which are unachievable super-human. Social license, once you become an administrator, it's different. You cannot speak on an issue as a sole researcher; you are speaking on behalf of the institutions. If academics become more involved in political issues, would that social contract still hold – academic freedom to express professional opinions/research?

The Graham Institute is focusing on public policy issues – such as hydraulic fracturing. There are many opportunities that are not recognized. The definition of what it means to be an academic is in flux.

How could we create capacity for engagement at all levels, at university sponsored/supported opportunities? Senior professors could model it, say by mentoring graduate students. Ask students to think 'is there a way that you can get a publication out of it?' Pre-tenure, we could simply say 'don't do it' or set ground rules such as 'Keep your toe in the water, but focus on your research.'

Group #2

Rules of Academia compared to needs of Society; are there formal limits to political engagement? There are no limits as long as we do it as individuals. We can do whatever we want with our own time. i.e., don't use university resources to support candidates.

Addressing vulnerability of scholar as political activist within context of rules for tenure and promotion. questions about what you would put on vita. Is political engagement valued?

In the field of Law, there is an issue for those seeking academic legitimacy of being too practical/too engaged. Articles that are too policy-focused vs. theoretical are not as valued. We see this in environmental law, which is not as respected as a field. Though from teaching point of view, there is seen to be a value in real world engagement (e.g., serving in presidential administration)

Pointing to vulnerability of professors (Bill Cronin) at University of Wisconsin, when they were targeted by the Governor. At U-M, we are protected by insulation provided by the Regents from the Legislature/Governor.

Service Component of professor role: could be doctor working for Hope Clinic, while work on climate change may not relate to his expertise. There is a question of using one's academic platform and position to share one's expertise.

Importance of what counts toward varied evaluations as faculty member. How can university/department encourage engagement -- should be valued in promotion and tenure considerations? Potential dangers: effective intervention may involve simplifying research (especially in science). How to refine an effective public voice while honoring complexities of scholarship? And how to be careful without overdoing ambiguity?

What is value of our voice? At some point, public has to trust us.

In some areas, we will claim our expertise as U-M professors: what are best ways to do that? Are there different stakes for this in a public vs private university?

Can this kind of work be anything but an add-on, i.e. how much can it really be valued? Our hope might be that it not be viewed or assessed negatively. How might we set standards for this kind of activity? By prestige of venue: NYT, Congressional Record, etc.? Success in communicating in way audience understands?

How to weigh in in a way that preserves your legitimacy, prestige, leadership? Can you sustain objectivity and not sacrifice complexity? Issue of opportunity costs of work it takes for broad public engagement. How to leverage broader engagement to amplify academic voice? How to measure impact: university and outsiders need to buy into it.

Are we set up to suddenly engage once one gets tenure? Is public discourse more valued at university level (function of institutional interest), but not by departments.

How do people get trained to do it? Are they expected to work it out for themselves? Unwritten social contract: that we have special license to say something.

Group #3

- Do we need to stick within our discipline? The University can sometimes ask us to stay within that space. But, does the mere fact of being an academic allow you the credibility to offer an educated opinion on any topic. Do schools really limit academic engagement?
- There are three possibilities for ways in which the University can guide academic engagement: (1) laissez faire, (2) restrict it, or (3) encourage it and include it in the guidelines for evaluation. Should the University do more than take a laissez faire attitude: Should they train, encourage and recognize it in evaluation and in tenure? Public Policy and Public Health school encourages it, but does not include it in the tenure process. SPH hired a screenwriter from Hollywood (paid for by dean) to train people how to do a TED Talk, stressing themes like getting your message out, being concise and engaging. A coach was kept on retainer to help faculty with story-telling, how to move beyond data and tables, especially to the media. SPH has a communications officer to make linkage with the Media to help publicize work, research, grants. This person also decides what is newsworthy.
- Does public engagement fit within the traditional fraction of faculty devoted to service, teaching or research, or does it need to be called out in a more singular fashion. Do we subsume it under education -- We have lots of support for being better at classroom teaching, but what do we offer to improve teaching outside the classroom. Does it fall under scholarship -- improving your own research track. Do we subsume it under service -- it is for the benefit of the school. Here at the UofM, service does include service to nation, community, the state (only to the university and the department). Public Policy dean wants to push the school to have a larger presence in the broader world. Engineering wants to get faculty elected to the National

Academy of Engineering. 40% teaching/40% research/20% service – at SPH. Where does engagement land and how does that fit with the percentages of importance?

- How do we change rewards and encouragement? The business school added a fourth category on Impact/Engagement in annual review. Is the topic ambiguous right now? Faculty can shape standards by what they submit for this category. But what about tenure review? These policies should be set by the school and department level. But for tenure, the Provost and the Regents have to be on board. If they are antagonistic to this idea, it will die. Further, outside school norms will influence any changes in tenure by the influence of outside letters. SPH impact is measured by letters and publications – when you go for letters you are relying on other school's definitions of impact. SPH will have a fourth category called “innovation and entrepreneurship,” that includes patents, developing programs. Is tenure overall a problem that keeps people from taking any risk pre-tenure. Tension between reaching out to people who can't read at a higher level versus being a populizer.
- Is Carl Sagan the model? He is now viewed positively by astronomy. Neil DeGrasse Tyson is the new Carl Sagan and head of Museum of Natural History. Is this kind of thing possible at the UofM? CK Prahalad had a huge impact on the field of business, but was not fully appreciated by the Business School. Does this vary by department, school?
- This should not happen pre-tenure. This is a later career decision, tolerated and encouraged with full professor. But we should reward this pre-tenure too! Some of the most influential astronomers in the blogosphere are pre-tenure. BUT, research is and always will be the most important thing here at Michigan. Should young scholars manage their careers any differently than senior professors? Young people are already blogging so they already are changing their path. They just do it. Should we provide some rules of the road, recognizing that people are going to do this anyway? Do theyglom onto this because there are no rules to the road? How do we check for quality on the internet? There is such an enormous array of info on the internet. Eventually that will have to happen. In the print world, there are rules of quality. They do not yet exist in the virtual world. Is this a freedom of speech issue? Or should there be standards

GROUP #4

Are there obstacles for young academics to do public engagement and also advance their careers?
Difference among disciplines?

Tenure process still based on peer-reviewed journals, mass publications (op-eds, industry publications, practitioners journals) not counted. *“Not bad, just not helpful.”* Recognized as service, but service not really important for tenure. “Service” means different things to different people. No connection to the “public good”. Service focuses on university committees,

Senior faculty advise junior faculty not to dedicate time to public engagement because it's not valued for promotion. To make significant contribution at public-policy level would take tremendous amount of time and effort, and it's not counted toward tenure.

Engagement is all about original research, not necessarily linked to application. *“This just raises the question of what the value of original research is, if no one is doing anything about it.”*

“Why are you here? – I have already have tenure, so I don’t care!”

“We all love it to happen, but it just takes too much time.”

“But engagement, if well done, should change both parties. Is there a sense that academic engagement will compromise pure scholarship by influencing research direction and content?”

Could we include engagement with other communities as a criterion for tenure?

NSF and NIH require assessment of impact of academic work. In humanities research, it’s not about the reach of your impact, but how accessible it will be for different communities.

“I object to characterizing engagement as outreach. It’s framed as ‘I’m the expert, and I will inform you. => “Change to, ‘I’m going to learn from you, and how do I engage with you in a way that allows that to happen?”

In UK, there’s experimenting with engaging to define research priorities. The engagement informs research agendas.

The system seems to be changing: 1) Social media and online publication will change the framework of peer review in the coming years; 2)

Responses for junior faculty: 1) Complement journal articles with shorter, more accessible pieces for public outreach (not a lot of lost opportunity); 2) Finding benefits in engagement for your academic research.

TED Talks: 1) Broad reach and engaging; 2) Inside Higher Education one-minute podcasts

CONCLUSIONS –

Downsides: 1) Lost-opportunity cost (reward system doesn’t support these priorities); 2) Reputational risk from being too public.

Advice for junior faculty: 1) “Great but make sure your core stuff is solid”; 2) And how to combine with academic priorities.

Group #5

In what ways do public engagement and your academic pursuits coincide and/or diverge?

Coincide

- As an outlet for an academic passion and to feel like one’s research has a greater purpose

- Using student engagement activities as a vehicle; the university is increasingly supportive of engaged learning experiences. These can be used to help inform and enrich research pursuits
- The commitment from NSF and other major agencies for a Broader Impact statement that contains real and worthwhile activities beyond merely incorporating research into the classroom has given more credibility to participating and leading engagement activities. Even if the activity itself is not valued by P&T and during annual reviews, a grant certainly is. Engaging in these types of opportunities is more easily justified when one is able to show how they have helped obtain outside funding.
- Discussions with the public often allow researchers to understand the bigger picture and context of their work. The public doesn't necessarily discern the fine gradations of disciplines and can often see connections that researchers in a reductionist mindset cannot (i.e. a "scientist" might be consulted on everything from hydrology to toxicology to the workings of the inner ear – because it's all "science")

Diverge

- Public engagement and typical academic products often require very different skill sets. They require different kinds and styles of writing and human interaction.
- Applied research is often more difficult to translate into publications, particularly ones that are highly valued in the academic sphere.
- There is an attitude of arrogance, bordering on disdain, within academia for those who actively engage in non-academic writing (see: Jarod Diamond and other public intellectuals)
- The public often does not necessarily discern the fine gradations of disciplines, leading researchers outside their expertise. The public sees the big picture, only to be greeted with "Well, that's not exactly what I work on."
- Big, highly visible and high impact engagement activities seem to be valued by academia (i.e. Cosmos with either Carl Sagan or Neil deGrassi Tyson), but not necessarily the smaller activities that are necessary to lead up to the higher impact efforts
- Engagement as seen as part of service, which is the least valued component of a tenure-track faculty's workload
- When relating one experience of public engagement, one participated that they "approached it as an academic, which was entirely incorrect." Persuasion is just as important as knowledge when informing a debate, which is a shock to many academics and may be in direct conflict with our research process. There is a very difficult balance between clear declarative statements and nuanced arguments of complex messages.

Suggestions for moving forward

- An obvious need for training for academics who wish to engage; learning how to be an effective communicator.

- Broader standards regarding a “Professional Impact Portfolio” within P&T beyond typical measures
 - Working with K-12 educators to influence early education curriculum to include critical thinking concepts. Most early science is taught as facts rather than exploration under uncertainty, which affects the critical thinking abilities of the public.
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Group #6

Q: What are the rules of academia, from a public discourse standpoint? How should we see our role? Do we have a role?

We talked about this, what are the rules, how should they change. One real danger in approaching the public as a technocrat: we know climate change is real, why won't you listen to us? We should consider how we can engage in a more collaborative manner, deliberative democratic, play the role of expert. It's also incumbent to take normative roles, depending upon where we are in the tenure track.

In mathematics, it is very different. Simulations of blood flow, I am personally very distant from public policy. Most problems are very abstract, not applied with rest public debate.

There are multiple answers depending upon what we study. In math, game theory has become applied to many policy issues. We are less removed than we think, depending upon how our research can be applied.

In logistics, there was never any question why I would be publicly engaged. My research does not have a broader public dimension, we're encouraged to engage with companies, but not public discourse. Only 2/20 in my group has had any engagement.

Half my career in NGO-advocacy and half in academia – to ban particular pesticides. Our opponent was big pharm – who hired ex-surgeon general as their expert. She read from a script. Academics were not willing to be so definitive. We were crushed. War of experts did not work, because we had academics – it was actually harmful. This is a 'non-mesh' – almost exclusively the case in political issues.

Public policy needs a clear, compelling message. In academia, it is never so clear. We're always trying to disprove things; never clear causation. We make things too sophisticated, have too much intellectual integrity. Factually based on analysis. Recognition of complexity. Recognition of uncertainty. We are 'flip-floppers'. Totally different culture, from what is required in public engagement.

Where do we go? Sacrifice our integrity? Public education around issues of uncertainty? How the scientific process/research works? There has to be a role for education – we are educators. We

could have a role at educating the broader public, where our knowledge is relevant to public discourse. How we educate in class is different from in the public. Public education is NOT valued.

We if want to explain the scientific process and uncertainty. In my discipline, that's more K-12. Unless I'm doing research on how valuable that outreach is, this would be a distraction. My Dean said 'don't do this. You should be writing your book.' Engagement dumbs down what we do. Until you have tenure, you cannot say a lot of things. You don't have a safe position yet. Until you have tenure, you're not part of the game of politics, where people can be much more aggressive. In the law school, people take positions in their legal writing. In the tenure process, it should be all about your research and not on public engagement. Tenure should not be such a strong wall, with different rules.

How else could we provide value? What about advocacy? Does it compromise our role if we take a position on the merits of a issue. That is one of my biggest fears, becoming a Michael Mann, taking a position on something... I tend to think that faculty should take positions, which are sometimes separated from their research. You have your research and then you have your opinions on broader issues. We could become just another pundit. Or you could exempt yourself completely from the debate. My hope would be that you are increasing the quality of discourse, even if it's not your area of expertise. The big debates are almost bigger macro issues, which are never clearly within one area of expertise. They will always be outside your expertise.

Tenure is just a time – BT. If you're doing something outside, any weakness in your record can be attributed to that. Are your priorities right? It can come back to your Dean.

My work is studying how environment/risk is regulated – I study the process and, thus, engage with that which I study. I study it, with the purpose of changing it. I have to believe that if I do good work, it will be recognized and valued as such. And I trust that I will end up where it will be valued. Not valued everywhere all the time.

If you do work, where there is a lot of public interest. If you show up in the media a lot, you have to dumb down. And you do appear to be less serious.

By virtue of working at a public university and we draw the ire of critics. As a public university, we have the obligation to be publicly engaged, by our very definition, in ways that are significant – more or less relevant.

For somebody, their expertise gets them called to speak on certain issues, like bullying. Universities want professors to speak on hot issues; they keep track of their faculty who are being cited in major public venues like the NYT. This is why we do our work – to get it out. We want to be part of certain conversations. More than vanity, public affairs care because it brings prestige, attention, funding. However, it wouldn't affect our standing in the university in any way; only based on our research funding, publications, teaching.

We need to shift our discourse – from academic speak. You think that it would be easy to write 1200 word piece in the Chronicle in Higher Education. But it's really hard. How to teach students in how to speak to multiple audiences – how do you do that? How do we move that? There is value

attributed institutional value, which is different from discipline value, and tenure-process value (could be seen as detracting). High level, thoughtful, high-quality research – with public importance. Why wouldn't it be valued? You're supposed to be a different person before tenure, than after.

Blog presences are being used to speak to larger publics. The problem is that there is no disposition to value that in tenure cases. There might be changes down the line, how that works has yet to be seen. Their portfolio could not be exclusively that. In law, bloggers all have tenure. Law historian is speaking to the legal perspectives on 'the corporation' with time, as this is being revisited by regulators. There are historians who get called upon to speak on certain issues, i.e., History of the Crimea, Civil war history...

Part of the concern is whether we can create a safe space for work that is NOT part of public work. We need to provide a sanctuary for more abstract, complex research. Wonder about the quality of how we translate our multifactor, complex research into a definitive sound-bite world. It cheapens us. Does it then mean that those things that don't have broader relevance become less valued? More pressure on a more world-oriented view will trim away the junk, engagement with broader applications. Simulating blood flow will have later applications. Being relevant is different from being in the public discourse.... Being smart and research oriented will have. Push definition of relevance.

There is no personal incentive to engage in public discourse. And before tenure, it can be dangerous. It matters where you are in your career. It's not valued. That's why these worlds are so different.