



Academic Engagement in Public and Political Discourse

Preliminary Analysis of Survey Results

Project Directors:

- **Mark Barteau**, Director, Energy Institute; College of Engineering
- **Andrew Hoffman**, Director, Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise, Ross School of Business, and School of Natural Resources and Environment
- **Andrew Maynard**, Director, Risk Science Center, School of Public Health
- **Shelie Miller**, School of Natural Resources and Environment
- **Don Scavia**, Director, Graham Sustainability Institute; College of Engineering, and School of Natural Resources and Environment

Steering Committee:

- **Gregg Crane**, Department of English
- **Paul Edwards**, School of Information
- **Sharon Glotzer**, College of Engineering
- **Lianne Lefsrud**, Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise, Ross School of Business, and School of Natural Resources and Environment
- **Shelie Miller**, School of Natural Resources and Environment
- **Joy Rohde**, Gerald R Ford School of Public Policy
- **David Uhlmann**, Law School

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Introduction

Should academics engage in public and political debates? To begin a discussion of this and the associated issues, we surveyed the actions and attitudes among University of Michigan Faculty, November 15-28, 2013. Results from this survey will inform a series of brownbag lunches where Faculty can meet to discuss their experiences in engaging in public and political debates. With data collected from the survey and the brownbag lunches, we propose to organize a national conference at the University of Michigan that seeks to analyze the role that academics can and should play within public and political debates, and importantly, the opportunities, hazards and best practices for doing so.

Respondents were recruited via email, using the network of affiliates of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise; Ross School of Business; School of Natural Resources and Environment; Energy Institute, College of Engineering; Department of English; School of Information; Risk Science Center, School of Public Health; Law School, and the Graham Sustainability Institute. We administered the survey online using Qualtrics and analyzed the data with SPSS 22. There were 368 respondents in total, though roughly 330 useable responses.

This is a summary of our preliminary analysis, in which we answer each of our research questions: What types of public and political activities do Faculty members undertake? What do they consider as being the opportunities and barriers with such activities? What do they consider as the role of the university in facilitating such activities? How do their beliefs, attitudes and actions vary as a function of their socio-demographics?

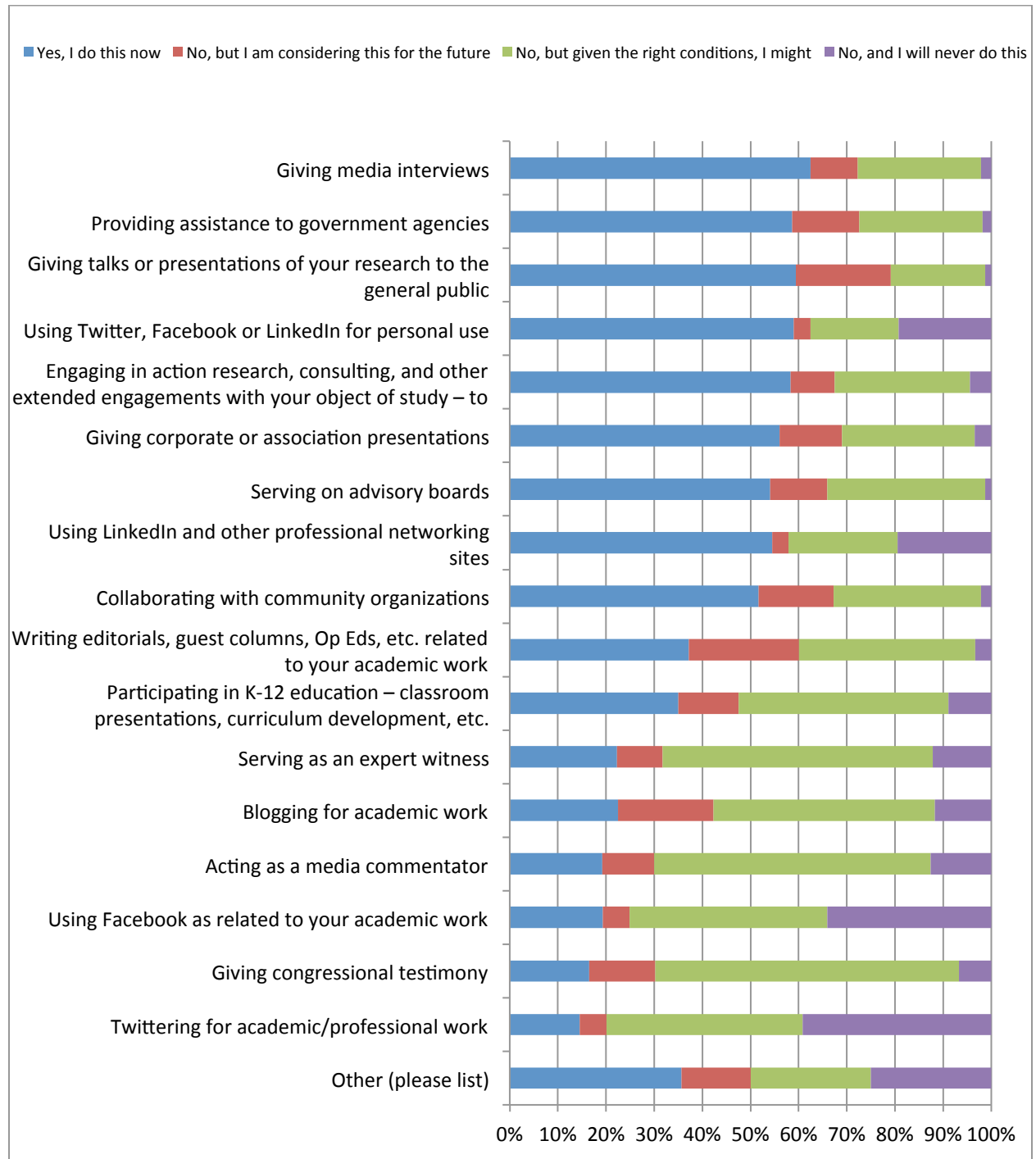
As the aim of our research is the relative groupings of respondents' beliefs, attitudes and actions, and not the testing of hypotheses *per se*, we restrict the quantitative analyses to measure simple frequencies and the strength of the association between variables. Although these are self-selected respondents (i.e., non-probability sample), we attempt to determine if they appear representative of U-M Faculty. While it is not our intent to generalize to larger populations, response bias is still a possible concern.* Thus, we compare the socio-demographics of respondents versus their departments to determine if there are broad trends in response and non-response.

* Though we lack overall faculty demographic data, our respondents appear to be more male (66%), older (31% are 30 years or more since their PhD; 49% are between 50 and 70 years old), and more senior than what might be expected in the general Faculty population (72% are tenure-track, 30% are full professor). Also, we have high representation from certain Schools/Faculties (23% Engineering, 18% Law, 15% Business and 11% Public Health) and low representation in others (0% from Art & Design, Education, Kinesiology, Nursing and Pharmacy).

41% of respondents would be interested in participating in a series of brownbag lunches where scholars share their experiences in public and political engagement (35% maybe, 24% no).

1. Have you done or do you intend to do any of the following public and/or political engagement activities?

Over 62% of respondents give media interviews, 59% provide assistance to government agencies and 59% give talks or presentations to the general public. 39% do not, and never will, use Twitter for academic/professional work; 35% say the same for Facebook (though 58% use Twitter and Facebook for personal use).

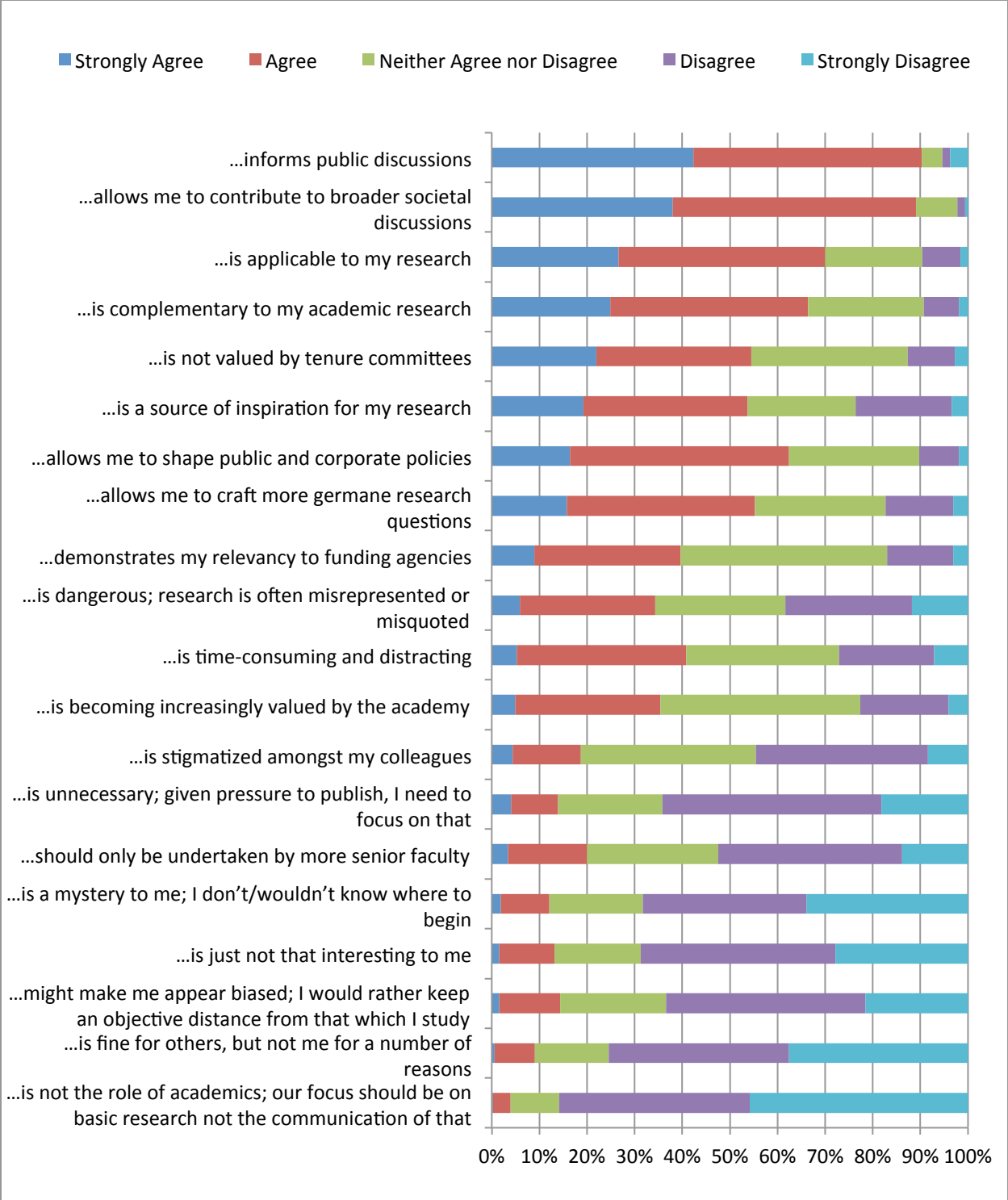


Other activities include

- Consulting: for government and for non-profit organizations
- Online: Creating online website to teach mathematics, online communities' events
- Policy and Standards: NAS Studies, writing SAE and ISO standards, drafting white papers
- Education: Adult Education Classes; visiting professorships, adjunct etc at other universities
- NGOs: volunteering, teaching, pro-bono technical assistance, assistance with advocacy strategy, various local community activities, working with an international NGO on reforms in a developing country. Conduct collaborative research with community-based organization leaders who in turn share research findings as, for example, expert witnesses, and congressional testimony.

2. To better understand why, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. Public/political engagement...

90% of respondents agree or strongly agree that public engagement informs public discussions and 86% disagree or strongly disagree that this is not the role of academics. 66% believe that external engagement is complementary to their academic research, though 56% believe this activity is not valued by tenure committees and 35% believe it is becoming increasingly valued by the academy. 34% believe this activity is dangerous as it is often misquoted and 41% believe it is time consuming and distracting.



3. Any additional comments on the obstacles or incentives, hazards or opportunities to engaging in public and political discussion not listed above?

It is surprisingly difficult to navigate this arena to find outlets that are an effective use of one's time. The New York Times is the gold standard, but even insiders have little idea how to get onto the op-ed page. Other newspapers (possibly excepting the Wall Street Journal and Washington Post) are of little value in reaching the public; beyond that, blogs and other platforms are likely to play mostly to the vanities of authors (which is also fine).

There are 24 hours in a day

I worry that public engagement could make political enemies, who could potentially interfere with my career for non-academic reasons

Obstacles: Many faculty not prepared to work with the media, for example (e.g., translating their research and its significance into sound bites). Some faculty still believe that faculty should not be involved in political engagement, and some faculty fear that doing so will diminish them in the eyes of important colleagues. I also think there's a jealousy component here: Those who don't do so may say they don't want to while not doing so because they fear their inadequacy.

It is sometimes difficult for university people to achieve credibility with the public. There is often an assumption that they have narrow knowledge and do not understand "real world" problems.

How senior officials threaten when one speaks out about a concern that they see. A concern that the person may have reported to the SEC, the IRS and others.

Could writing one's congressman (who is against increased funding for scientific research) be misinterpreted and bring more scrutiny to the U???

The "hazards" vary widely depending on the channel of communications. Blogs, testimony, presentations, etc., permit one to get a complete message out there. One has much less control in dealing with the press, whose objective is often a soundbite that may be out of context, misquoted or misconstrued.

Most faculty live in a bubble and appear naive and out-of-touch when discussing something not directly related to their research. Because I view political activities as being outside of a faculty member's job description, I believe faculty should engage in political discussions to the same extent that other citizens do (no more, no less), and not in the context of their jobs.

Not all who received this survey are evaluated according to the same metrics. Distinguishing respondents by type of professorial appointment (e.g., tenure-track, clinical, lecturer, research) might give a more accurate picture. I am clinical faculty, so much of my public engagement directly supports how my work is perceived by my leadership.

This survey is poorly designed. You are conflating two different things. The "the communication of that research" is fine and indeed the responsibility of every academic. On the other hand, advocating public policies is the very opposite of science and objective research. For example, if one studies climate, describing the research is great, but advocating for carbon taxes is anti-scientific and will undermine the academy over the long run. When one begins advocating a specific public policy, one can no longer claim to have no stake in the outcome of objective research, thus no claim to objective science.

I think the wording of these questions is terrible! You have set up the questions as if there is a dichotomy between outreach vs. research, and many of your questions incorrectly equate measurable consequences of outreach (e.g., it is 'time-consuming') with value judgements (e.g., it is 'distracting'). I think your survey is foul and misleading. Many of the pros and cons are simultaneously true.

My school places reasonable value on this activity so I don't feel particularly conflicted between what I know I should do and what I do to make a committee happy.

Pressure from corporate partners and donors to the University not to engage in advocacy

Danger of being misrepresented and then subject to harassment, particularly online.

I'm not eligible for tenure so could result in loss of job.

It's important not to be a hack, and that risk is a real one.

Science is often miscommunicated by laymen, and factually incorrectly presented to the public (of course, often times also out of a political bias - so on purpose). Certainly scientists would principally be really qualified to communicate science to the public. BUT: this is a very dangerous business, as the media often times take quotes out of context, so one has to be very careful not to do more harm than good. Also, as faculty, we are not really trained to do this.

Government agencies, courts, and the media more interested in partisan positions than in balanced analysis. They seem to feel that the best way to get a balanced analysis is to present and compare two unbalanced views.

All of my responses above need to be taken in the context that I am emeritus, 86 years old and still active (and will be as long as health permits).

Emotional impact of negative comments and personal attacks received after publishing/posting in public can be large and hard to cope with. In public engagement related to climate change, the large majority of responses from anonymous members of the public are denialist, often personal, bitter, and angry. It's hard not to get caught up in responding, but that usually starts an endless cycle that's hard to get out of.

The "I do it now" category I took to mean "I do it now or have done it in the recent past."

Public engagement is important but needs to be done carefully for the reasons stated above (being misquoted, unfairly criticized etc.).

Is strongly discouraged in engineering and exact sciences, particularly in young faculty

If you want faculty to engage with the public, it must be structurally rewarded in hiring and promotion, just like research.

Often the people who are engaging with the public seem to be precisely the ones who ought least to be doing so, at least in my opinion. I think more engagement would lead to better average engagement, but then I wonder, who am I to say that my views are the right ones?

Easy for the commentators to make a newbie academic look like a fool. This makes it difficult to get started. Once you are seen as a fool, difficult to get anyone to take you seriously.

Those who generated this survey seem completely paranoid to me. Either that, or they are just afraid of / do not understand technology. As an engineer I see my role in society as becoming increasingly important. The politicians are not going to solve the world's problems. Engineers need to be much more strongly engaged.

While funding agencies (specifically Federal) often have members of the public engaged in part of the process, the actual merit scoring of most grants in my field pays essentially no attention to public engagement or opinion. I have seen this as both an applicant and reviewer.

Limited time.

writing design standards and policies need to be considered in tenure decision just as journal articles are considered

I think the real danger here is the underlying assumption that already pervades this questionnaire. I.e. that academics as a group should do more public engagement. I think that is wrong-headed. Academia always had various functions and roles. Some academics served a public role, some did basic research. This is true even today. We have the Richard Dawkins, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Paul Krugman, Melissa Harris-Perry and Chomsky, to name but a few. Substitute those names with perhaps Sagan, Dewey or Thomas Huxley and one gets examples of public academics of the past. This is a very good separation of labor. It is not actually true that we need more professors to spend less time doing research and more time being public figures. In fact time to do actual research is already limited for professors due to level of demands for teaching, grant writing, and service. We need those who do public outreach to be excellent at what they do. And we need those who actually do serious research to have the time to do it! However there are very real negative consequences already because this narrative of public discourse is being propagated. The quality of job talks is more frequently now close to public relations TED talks rather than serious discussions of deep intellectual work. Being in the media often is seen as a pathway to tenure and it is not at all a pathway that is problematic. Flashy widely visible results trump hard work in the lab that does not have the same PR. All these are very troubling developments and should not be encouraged but countered. Aspects of this are not new either, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has already investigated in the 80s. Public visibility has long been a mechanism to accrue academic status. If we require this of everybody, however we lose out on the potential to nurture great minds who do not have the

talent for public discourse.

untenured faculty whom I have spoken with sometimes have a great fear of saying anything that might be controversial or not "politically correct."

I co-authored a report you might like to look at: Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University (Ellison and Eatman, 2008). Would be delighted to participate in work addressing this issue. <http://imaginingamerica.org/fg-item/scholarship-in-public-knowledge-creation-and-tenure-policy-in-the-engaged-university/>

The polarization of public discourse creates the hazard that the scholar may be identified as a political partisan.

I find the society in general lacks open minded discourse and ramifications of legal ramifications dissuades me from being actively engaged. The University's institutionalized bias of of non AA mainstream thoughts and values further discourages open discussion. It is not obvious to me that the university community even recognizes the narrow spectrum of it's institutionalized culture.

many use the perception that this work is risky to avoid making public contributions. However, I don't think this kind of work is for everyone. There are many in academia who don't have the kind of interests or personality to work well with the lay public. good public work requires the ability to listen, learn, and collaborate.

I have always taken the policy advocacy approach rather than the neutral expert and have been involved in national and international policy debates and political decisions through Congressional testimony and whit papers. This action oriented research is not as highly valued by the academy as some other types but it profoundly more interesting.

Major concerns involve trying to communicate with people who have such different world views and educational levels that it is difficult to argue effectively.

tenure and academic incentives do not encourage public engagement.

I'm not sure how necessary this is, but lest there be any perceived conflict of interest or partisan interests, I take a lot of care to ensure that my public engagement is done on my own time and with my own resources. I do spend substantial time in public engagement, and it helps that I am on a 50% line.

A tremendous amount of energy is required to make sure that my words are not misinterpreted. I have also had major media outlets plagerize my own words without attributing them to me. E.g. Nancy Schneiderman of NBC plagerized my own term "misguided benevolence" without attribution.

This is something that as academics we can and should do. Many of us have. But we should also resist being co-opted by for-profit entities. This is a big danger and I think the U should really think twice about the ways that its faculty might end up getting used in unsavory ways.

There are many roles for academics in public/political engagement. Such engagement does not have to mean advocacy, and I work hard to maintain discernable objectivity. As a result of this I am regularly asked to, say, write a blog prior to governmental meetings, because blogs are entered into public testimony and mine are viewed as more objective than most. What I write does not help me with funding agencies, in fact, I could probably argue that it hurts me, because program managers are concerned with what I might say. I often say I could not have the level of engagement that I have if I did not have tenure.

It takes time and energy which may detract from work towards tenure.

More talk ... The whole higher education system is an anachronism. The best research and teaching content is almost never in academic journals any longer, and for various reasons. The biggest reason is that there is a veritable tsunami of content being published in myriad different media. In both scale and scope, peer-reviewed research is a single tiny piece of mist coming off of that tidal wave. Universities fret that massively open online courses threaten their franchise, and indeed they do. But this is only one franchise that is in peril. And the fundamentals driving the tsunami are incontrovertible and unstoppable. The die is cast.

our research needs to relate to the world, this is so basic. in medicine we do research to solve problems (e.g. disease) and promote health. likewise, in social sciences (including topics like economics) we need to relate to the world and help improve it (fix problems and promote wellbeing). in both there is basic research that might be more esoteric and ivory tower AND work that is more closely related to phenomenon. in either case, there needs to be dialogue and interactions beyond the academy to inform research questions and share research processes and findings. the only

hazard i see is being isolated and removed from society.

Not all interactions are the same - in terms of skills required, potential benefits to the community/discourse, and potential for negative consequences (time consumption, potential for public, legal, or academic attack). Not much training in this or guidance on how to chose the best forums.

I am currently pre-tenure, and am not doing a lot of public or political engagement. After tenure I'd be more open to pursuing opportunities of this kind.

Lecturers should be a part of this discussion, but they face a different set of pressures regarding time, emphasis on teaching and teaching evaluations for continued contracts, and a set of time constraints in which research and communication may not be factored into job descriptions or performance reviews.

The push for an increase in this aspect of our work must come from "the top" and then be backed up all the way down the leadership chain into the schools, the departments, and in advice regarding tenure preparations. Also, it would be good to have better tools and training on how to approach these discussions. The U of M does not do this very well as compared to some top professional schools.

On one hand, being too focused on influencing the public discourse will derail an academic scholar from the important research work he or she needs to do. On the other hand, the more our public policy gets out-of-line with intellectual and scientific rigor, the harder our futures will be as academics. I believe a balance is necessary.

I think that academia tends to lean left; I know that in 30-plus years as a member of five university faculties, I have heard a great deal of disdain expressed for opinions not in conformity with the prevailing ones. That certainly discourages research that might lead to unpopular conclusions (e.g., unflattering studies of green energy sources; work that does not support anthropogenic climate change, and the like). For all the talk about the value of diversity, unorthodox political opinions--at least those that lean right--do not appear to be welcome in the academic community, so any research that might support unpopular political positions is probably also discouraged. A major university, like the U of M, could do a lot for public discourse by actively seeking out and encouraging the expression of diverse opinions from members of its community.

Unless the research has near term impact, there is a tendency to "hype" research to try and magnify its impact before it has really accomplished anything. I think academics should affect public policy and the public should be informed of research, but without the tendency to spin or hype the near term benefits

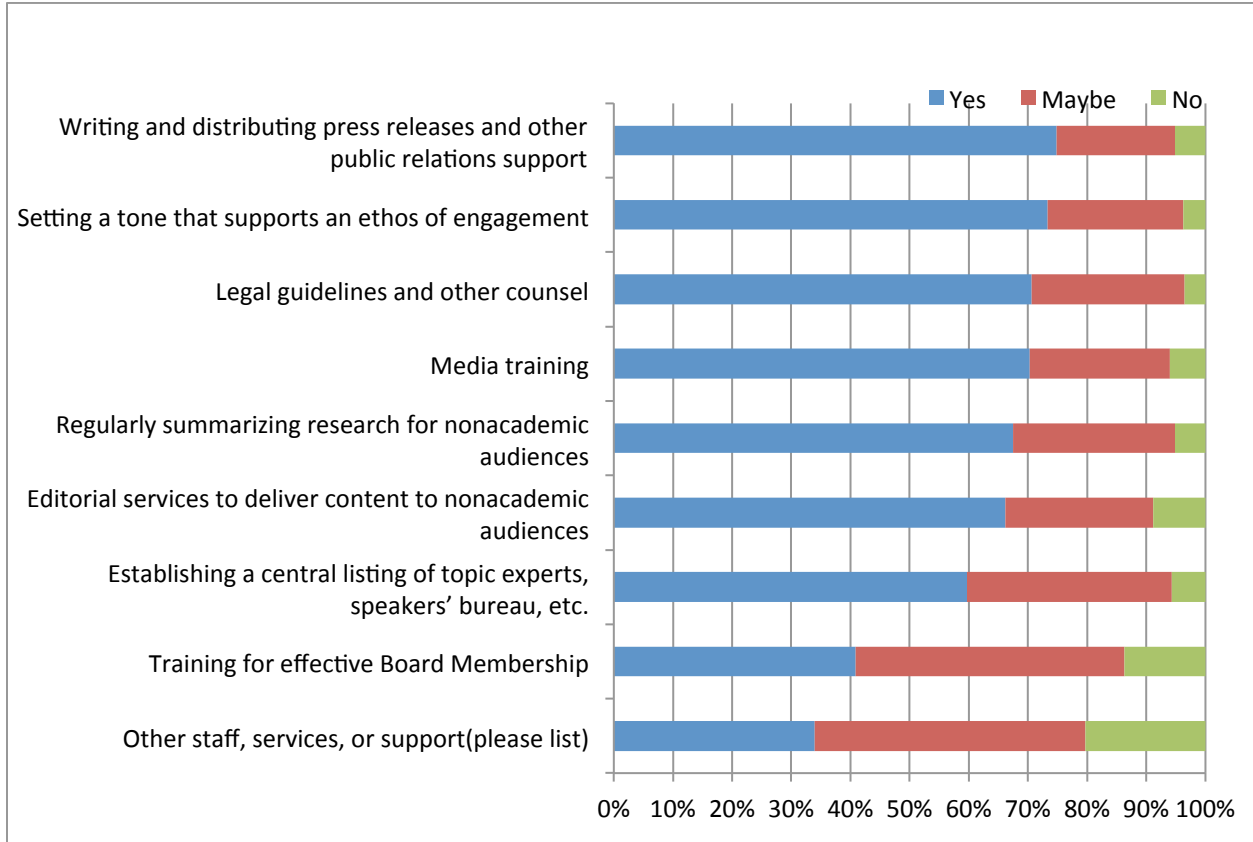
Above is more thna enough

Most of these questions are very remote from my work as an engineering mathematician. I do hope you are not going to weigh everyone equally.

In many occasion, those of us focusing on academic research tend to be isolated and/or uninformed of the needs of the general public. We do not tend to represent the 'general' public. Public policy needs to serve everyone.

4. When you are engaging or contemplating the activities listed above, what additional support do you think that U-M could/should provide?

75% of respondents believe that the U-M should be writing and distributing press releases, 72% believe that the U-M should set a tone that supports engagement.



Additional suggested support includes:

- Helping understand appropriate public engagement, which is no simple matter
- Infrastructure support for staff for different entities on campus to engage in this type of work: staff services, website/blogging support, library support
- Lower administrative load, overall
- Grant application assistance for engaged projects
- Creating university-wide publications that demonstrate public engagement and relevance
- Training to t & r committees on what should qualify as success in regards to community-engaged scholarship
- Legal protection
- PR staff to help write summaries for nonacademic audiences, media people with an understanding of what we do.
- Translation for non-English-speaking communities
- Actively making community engagement part of tenure
- I am less interested in delivering expert knowledge to "non-experts" than in bringing diverse experts around a common table. Translational research matters a lot, but our language changes through the

work we do with collaborators in nonacademic settings. That's the way to learn, though these other things are handy skill sets. However they can reinforce the detachment and technocratic character of academic 'experts.' not that I don't highly value expertise! I do.

- Funding, travel assistance for congressional or other high-value public testimony; finance entrepreneurial efforts by faculty
 - I feel U-M does many of these things. Would be concerned with a one-size fits all in board membership.
 - Higher education needs a whole new business model and relationship with faculty. As a very urgent matter.
-