

Research Universities as Partners in Community-Engaged Scholarship

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First, let me say how delighted I am to be back at Princeton – a place where I spent a decade on the faculty in psychology – and especially honored to be able to lend my applause to the twenty-five-year celebration of the impactful scholarship and pedagogy associated with the Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship (ProCES) under the auspices of the Dean of the College. The breadth and longevity of ProCES is something to be so proud of and so worthy of a rousing cheer today, especially as we live in a time of substantial public skepticism about the relevance and value of the academy – a subject to which I will return in a moment.

I want to start by situating community-engaged scholarship as complementary to, and mutually reinforcing with, the allied and distinguished tradition of “service learning” and public service volunteerism which have also importantly flourished, here at Princeton, and nationally, creating generations of active, civically-minded citizens.² I see community-engaged scholarship as rooted in knowledge production and pedagogy more than in service, even as both traditions are oriented toward the public good, addressing the vexing challenges of our time, from climate justice to equitable economic growth to racial equity and public health and safety, to name only a few.

Positioning Community-Engaged Scholarship at the Center of the Academy

I start with this positioning of CES at the core of our scholarly mission because it describes best the evolution of this field of work over the last several decades, as universities have (sometimes begrudgingly) inched our way out of the ivory tower, defining a role that my former colleague Steve Schomberg and I labelled some time ago as poised between the monastery and the marketplace.³ This opening up of the core work of universities has continued to evolve, with many institutions now moving more fulsomely into position as anchor institutions in our localities, collaborating and co-producing place-based knowledge that resonates globally⁴ -- an evolution that I will return to later.

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² As one indicator: when the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement was introduced in 2006, 76 institutions earned the designation. As of 2024, 368 institutions hold the designation. See Driscoll, A. (2008). Carnegie’s Community-Engagement Classification: Intentions and Insights, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 40:1, 38-41, DOI: [10.3200/CHNG.40.1.38-41](https://doi.org/10.3200/CHNG.40.1.38-41); and <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/news/carnegie-2024-community-engagement-classifications/>.

³ Cantor, N. and Schomberg, S. (2003). Poised between two worlds: The university as monastery and marketplace, *EDUCAUSE Review* 38 (2), 12-21.

⁴ See, for example, the work of the Anchor Institutions Task Force and its members, <https://www.margainc.com/initiatives/aitf>.

I want to counter right off the bat the ways in which our disciplinary and scholarly traditions have frequently relegated this highly engaged and collaborative scholarly activity to a lesser standing, even making it difficult for publicly-engaged scholars to be rewarded (and promoted) based upon this engagement. For example, in 1999 several of us at the University of Michigan organized *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, under the leadership of its founding director, Julie Ellison, precisely to provide a community of practice for faculty members “who wanted to do public scholarship and live to tell the tale.” Imagining America (IA) quickly evolved into a robust national network reflecting the growing interest in public scholarship, moving from Michigan to Syracuse University, under the leadership of Jan Cohen-Cruz and then co-directors Tim Eatman and Scott Peters, and then to UC Davis where it is flourishing today under the leadership of Erica Kohl. One of the first big projects embraced by IA was the Tenure Team Initiative, to gather information on how to best integrate publicly-engaged scholarship into tenure and promotion.⁵ Another key focus for IA has been to enshrine the centrality of public scholarship in graduate education, creating the Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) fellows program for graduate students in the humanities, arts, and design. Most recently, IA has produced a terrific set of pedagogical tools – *The Public Scholar Conversation Cards and the Public Scholar Imagination Guide* – to spur “teaching and learning circles” focused on making the “university a more hospitable, caring, and creative place to nurture public, engaged, and activist scholarship, artmaking, and design.” While IA’s network began with a set of engaged humanists and artists (and a few of us social scientists), the annual conferences now attract scholars across a range of disciplines and community partners, with commitments to collaborating on the complex issues facing us all today. In other words, as CES has continued to evolve over the last 25 years or so, it has been tackling in numerous ways the importance of situating this work as mission-central and mission-critical to the academic excellence of our institutions.

Indeed, the premise of this work is that to address the wicked problems of our world, we need increasingly to create a seamless two-way street between the university and the community, including embracing the co-production of knowledge and pedagogy with what my colleague Peter Englot and I labelled as a “community of experts” with and without pedigree.⁶ In so doing, we move intentionally beyond what Harry Boyte brilliantly characterized as the more typical academic “cult of the expert.”⁷ For example, the descriptions of the network of national participants and places in the [Crafting Democratic Futures](#) project on reparations, organized by Earl Lewis’ Center for Social Solutions, reveal the interplay between the archival public history and the current day, community-based dialogues. The insights of public historians and their students, tracing a line from slavery, from the plundering of indigenous lands and peoples, from the red-lining of urban neighborhoods, to today’s systemic inequities, are greatly enhanced and brought to life in the realities surfaced by the voices that imagine reparations in community dialogues.

⁵ Ellison, J. and Eatman, T.K. (2008). *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University*. Syracuse, NY: Imagining America.

⁶ Scobey, D. (2002). “Putting the Academy in its Place,” *Places* 14(3) 50-55; Cantor, N. and Englot, P. (2017) “Psychological Science in Public: It Takes a Diverse Village to Make a Difference,” in Zweigenshaft, R. and Borgida E. eds. *Collaboration in Psychological Science: Behind the Scenes*, 203-14. New York: Worth Publishers.

⁷ Boyte, H.C. (2009). *Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert*. Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation.

If we do not begin by positioning CES right at the center of the academy's scholarly mission, then we are liable to set up obstacles that prevent even the best of us from welcoming in our community partners as co-equals who contribute significantly to what systems theorist, Scott Page, reminds us is the "diversity bonus" that comes when our collective intelligence is enriched by insights from a diverse collection of lived experiences.⁸ Or, as one of my favorite community partners in Syracuse told me, "Nancy, just ask us, we lay our heads down here at night." In order to reap the substantive benefit of such co-production – to listen rather than lecture -- we have to be sufficiently centered and secure. We have to believe what a legend in my field of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, asserted many, many years ago, in initiating a methodology that came to be called *action research*, and that is: "The best way to understand something is to try to change it,"⁹ and that is what motivates the evolving tradition of CES – the intertwining and mutual back and forth between societal impact and social knowledge production. Which brings me to the interconnection between community-engaged scholarship and inclusive innovation.

Community-Engaged Scholarship and Inclusive Innovation

In 2015, Ira Harkavy, Myra Burnett and I produced an NSF-sponsored white paper summarizing the insights from an international workshop on promising approaches to advancing equity in STEM centered on effective higher education-community engagement.¹⁰ At the core of the findings was the critical recognition of what we called a "recursive, iterative approach" to STEM innovation based on the following three propositions: "Significant societal problems cannot be solved without full inclusion. Inclusion, in turn, will result in better science and a better society." And, perhaps most relevant for us here today, "Higher education-community engagement focused on locally manifested universal problems is an effective strategy for realizing full inclusion and for producing better science and a better society."

By way of illustration, we can look at the climate justice arena. As those of us who served on the National Science Foundation Committee on Equal Opportunity in Science and Engineering (CEOSE) witnessed some years ago when NSF identified [ten "Big Ideas" for future investment](#), studying something complex like the "[New Arctic](#)" could not succeed without the input of the indigenous populations living with and seeing up close the generational impact of climate change. Fast forward to the many community-engaged climate projects they are supporting now, including a multi-faceted Geoscience Ecosystem that Rutgers-Newark Professor Ashaki Rouff is building in Newark, engaging neighborhood community gardeners, parks system officials and resident park-goers, K-12 educators and students, and scholars across the sciences and humanities, to unpack the toxic sequelae of urban pollution, propose local interventions, and generate a new inclusive generation of geoscientists and climate activists working side by side. This positive, recursive cycle is being repeated all across our country and globe as similar

⁸ Page, S. (2017). *The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

⁹ Lewin, K. (1951). "Problems of Research in Social Psychology," in *Field Theory in Social Science*, ed. Dorwin Cartwright, New York: Harper & Row: 155-169.

¹⁰ Harkavy I., Cantor N., and Burnett M. (2014), *Realizing STEM equity and diversity through higher education-community engagement*, Netter Center on University-Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

collectives of university scientists and citizen scientists co-produce knowledge in the face of and in order to face down climate change.¹¹

Meeting the Challenges of our Time and Opening up Possibilities for the Future

Just as this work promises real interventions on the ground, I would argue that it also brings another broader benefit to us all. At a moment of tremendous public skepticism about science, captured forcefully by Peter Hotez in his recent book entitled “*The Deadly Rise of Anti-Science: A Scientist’s Warning*,” the promise of university scholars and students becoming trusted partners and co-producers of knowledge in local communities takes on a heightened importance.¹² This challenge and the related promise of CES across the disciplines was underscored by Franco Montalto, in a piece in *Nature*: “If more academics in all fields built real-world problems into their teaching, research, and service, we all might feel more optimistic about humanity’s ability to solve pressing problems, such as climate change. By co-developing projects with on-the-ground partners, faculty members can help communities in need and teach students not only about science, but also about how science can be applied in an uncertain, increasingly vulnerable world.”¹³ And, I would add, the resulting community-informed and co-produced scholarship on those pressing issues likely produces better science and better solutions than when we go it alone, as Ira and Myra and I argued in our NSF white paper.

This approach also carries with it the promise of engaging a much wider and more diverse populace than we often see within the academy. This widening of participation, along with the public trust that is built, can, then, reap an added benefit to all our efforts to represent within our walls the “diversity explosion” that demographer Bill Frey has shown to be real.¹⁴ We live in an odd moment when Frey’s diversity explosion and Page’s diversity bonus collide with expanding anti-DEI campaigns reaching into the curriculum and practices of schools and universities in states across the country.¹⁵ This makes it even more urgent that the academy writ large build the trust of communities by attracting and directly engaging a diverse group of participants as co-producers in our work.

Anchor Institutions and Mutually Beneficial Collaborations

The notion of working in synchrony, university and community together, brings me to what I see as the latest and frankly most promising evolution of the field of CES, and that is the movement to see and realize the role of universities (and many other types of organizations) as sustained, committed, anchor institutions in and of our localities (broadly defined), as promoted

¹¹ See, for example, the public engagement work of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (<https://www.aaas.org/programs/public-engagement>) and the Association for the Advancement of Participatory Sciences (<https://participatorysciences.org/>), and the Humanities Action Lab’s network of climate justice scholars and students <https://www.humanitiesactionlab.org/climatesofinequality>.

¹² Hotez, P. (2023). *The Deadly Rise of Anti-Science: A Scientist’s Warning*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹³ Montalto, F. (2023). “Professors: let’s use real-world problems in teaching,” *Nature* 621, 659.

¹⁴ Frey W. H. (2015), *Diversity explosion: how new racial demographics are remaking America*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC.

¹⁵ See, for example, The Chronicle of Higher Education’s online DEI Legislation Tracker: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts>.

by the *Anchor Institutions Task Force* (AITF), along with other organizations such as Campus Compact and the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). AITF grew out of a working group way back in 2009 that produced a white paper on the power of universities and hospitals, Eds and Meds, as anchor institutions. This project was organized by Ira Harkavy at the request of then secretary of HUD, Shaun Donovan, to review the potential for stable anchors to collaborate with community partners on equitable growth, especially in the face of the growing urbanization of our world. Since that time, AITF has grown from the 20 or so working group members to over a thousand participants from urban, rural, and indigenous communities, importantly representing not only universities and hospital systems as anchors but arts and cultural anchors, corporations committed to staying in place, local community development and municipal government organizations, and more. This movement has taken off, spreading from coast to coast, as well as internationally, with the help of the Council of Europe.¹⁶

The focus of universities as anchor institutions, working side-by-side with other anchor partners over this last decade or more, has ranged broadly too, across the many content arenas impacting equitable growth and community well-being.

I'll close today with a few examples from my community, Newark, NJ, just down the road, where my institution, Rutgers University-Newark has had the honor of collaborating and building its presence as a trusted anchor partner with a range of other anchors, from large corporations like Prudential Financial, that has been headquartered in Newark for almost 150 years to their relatively newer corporate neighbor, Audible, and major arts anchors like the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) and the Newark Museum of Art to hospitals like Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, and so many more anchor partners. In fact, our Newark Anchor Collaborative has grown since its inception at the behest of Mayor Baraka, to include some 18 anchor institutions, all working in tandem with City Hall and the range of non-profits in the Newark Community Development Network to promote equitable growth and racial equity in Newark.¹⁷

The key features of success for anchor institution collaboration are emblematic of the evolution of CES itself. First, is the commitment to elevate community voices. In Newark, we see that dramatically illustrated in our Newark Public Safety Collaborative working to reduce crime in our city. While scholars from our School of Criminal Justice serve as the backbone organizers for NPSC, producing data from their Risk Terrain Modelling on the characteristics of the *places* where crime is occurring (vacant lots, unlit ATMS, cars idling outside bodegas) – not the *people* doing the crime – it is the 40 or so community and law enforcement partners who regularly sit around the NPSC table that devise the interventions that have proven so successful. As anyone around the table will tell you, their co-production approach, which they label as a Data-Informed Community Engagement model, not only has resulted in substantial crime-reduction, but has built significant trust across university-law enforcement-community residents-

¹⁶ See the Council of Europe's growing list of publications on higher education and community engagement here: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/publications>.

¹⁷ See, for example, the May 2022 report, Newark Anchor Collaborative: Promoting Racial Equity and Equitable Growth at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/639cd715b33192583d618677/t/63fce2f8dc9af9027bde4eff/1677517563428/Newark-Anchor-Collaborative-Case-Study.pdf>.

leaders of community street teams and more, such that the word is out, including attracting federal funding to support the spread of the DICE model across neighborhood collectives elsewhere.

Just as the collective work of the Newark Public Safety Collaborative has impacted the way law enforcement does its work, university scholars working in tandem with community groups and public officials can jointly inform public policy. For example, our law faculty work with the Mayor's Equitable Growth Advisory Commission on housing affordability and the risk of displacement of Newark residents by way of the capital investment flowing into our city. We've seen it also in the match-making that our business school faculty have done through their Local Supply Chain Resiliency Center, as they line up the procurement needs of all the Newark Anchor Collaborative partners with the often forgotten but quite robust range of local diverse suppliers available in Newark, contributing in the process to reducing greenhouse gases by localizing supply chains.

Fundamentally, success in this work depends on how willing we are to both center the work of our public scholars within our core mission and simultaneously open our institutions to genuinely be in and with our communities, however you define the geographical boundaries of place-based work. In this regard, I always point to the New Jersey prison education and re-entry program, [NJ-STEP](#), dedicated to engaging the wisdom of justice-engaged citizens throughout NJ, for which we serve as the administrative backbone. NJ-STEP (which, by the way, includes Princeton faculty) may do much of its work in the confines of maximum-security facilities, but the restorative pedagogy co-defined by faculty and participants and re-entry alums collectively has long legs, reaching back to change not only our universities but our home communities as well. The dual impact, on campus and in community, of NJ-STEP is spreading broadly, as for example, at Rutgers-Newark, formerly incarcerated students and the faculty teaching in the program have teamed with colleagues in urban education, journalism, and the Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice, on a Mellon-funded Sawyer Seminar on the "[Potentialities of Justice: Toward Collective Reparative Futures](#)."

In this same vein, Express Newark, our university-community arts collaboratory in downtown Newark, does more perhaps than any other part of our institution to bring us all together in Newark, levelling the playing field, opening the flow of inter-group dialogue, celebrating the legacy of resilience and strength – as in the current exhibition of Newark artists celebrating the 60th anniversary of the brilliant work, *Blues People*, by legendary Newarker, Amiri Baraka.¹⁸ As powerful as is the art that is produced and co-produced and exhibited and celebrated in this venue, even more encouraging is how the collaborative space sends a clear signal that we are open for "business" in and of Newark, contributing to awakening the commitment of a next generation of our student change-makers, more of whom hail from our great city than ever before.

Research Universities and Community-Engaged Scholarship: On Track Together

¹⁸ Jones, L. (1963). *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from It*, New York: Apollo Editions.

In closing, I return to the mutuality of benefits for research universities and for communities that have evolved over the last several decades from CES and the growing movement for anchor institution collaboration. As more and more institutions and disciplines have recognized this work as central to the scholarly and pedagogical mission, this has smoothed the way for faculty, students, staff, and community partners to traverse a two-way street that engages the co-production model. In turn, the inevitable focus of much of the work on racial and social justice that naturally emerges as central when we tackle the vexing issues of our day – the obstacles to opportunity embedded on the ground in so many of our home communities – gives this work legitimacy in ways far more immediate and powerful than when the voice of the academy pronounces its insights. The recognition of an inclusive round of voices, speaking from diverse lived experience, goes far and wide to build trust and coincidentally to change the complexion of our institutions in the process. And, finally, when we get fully on track together, especially as participants in multi-sector, community-wide anchor collaboratives, the networks of like-minded institutions and organizations and partners, all working in place, truly do resonate far and wide, over time and place. The work never becomes easy, but it does feel as if the arc does bend toward justice, as Martin Luther King, Jr, reminded us some time ago, as long as we maintain an appetite for non-linear progression. So, as we celebrate the twenty-five years evolution of CES here at Princeton, we can cheer, but with humility – for there is a lot more work to do.