



Why Community Engaged Scholarship Needs a Clear Definition

John Saltmarsh, University of Massachusetts-Boston

Gene Alonzo Corbin, Tufts University

Prabhdeep Kehal, Brown University

On campuses across the United States, “community engaged scholarship” has emerged as a promising strategy for problem-solving research, civic education, and revitalizing the democratic aspirations of higher education. Originally in response to student and social movement activists of the 1960s and 1970s who fought to make higher education a public good in practice rather than in theory, community engaged scholarship aimed to bring an aspirational democracy committed to equity into higher education’s role in society. This kind of scholarly work connects the core purpose of higher education—the generation and dissemination of knowledge—to efforts to address critical public issues.

Faculty accomplish these vital aims by bringing collaborations with off-campus community partners into their teaching, service, and research and creative activities. In such engaged scholarly activities, faculty collaborate with community partners to advance knowledge and students develop a sense of responsibility to society along with the capacity to act effectively on matters of public importance. Engaging communities in teaching and research increases relevance and improves outcomes.

Community engaged scholarship depends upon mutually beneficial partnerships between campuses and local, regional, national, and global communities. By forging such partnerships, the resources of higher education are leveraged to address social issues while instilling a passion for civic and democratic engagement in young people. In a time when the relevance and benefits of higher education are questioned by many critics, community engaged scholarship counters ivory-tower stereotypes.

What is Community Engaged Scholarship?

Unclear definitions prevent community engaged scholarship from gaining traction and make it difficult for colleges and universities to implement, share, compare, and evaluate practices that build mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. If community engaged scholarship can mean almost anything, it risks meaning nothing.

“Engagement” is the key term to describe practices in which faculty, students, and staff come together with off-campus partners to address community issues and improve teaching and learning. The following features of community engaged scholarship are central to its definition:

- **The way knowledge is conceived.** In community engaged scholarship, knowledge is understood to transcend disciplines and the boundaries of the college or university. Community partners are key contributors who possess knowledge of value to both teaching and problem-solving research.

- **Relationships between academics and off-campus community partners.** In community engaged scholarship, relationships between people on and off campus are characterized by reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared authority. The goals, procedures, and outcomes of community engaged scholarship are co-created in processes grounded in ongoing relationships between campus and community partners.
- **Scholarly products produced to address public issues.** Research products resulting from community engaged scholarship may be published in academic venues like peer-reviewed journals and university press books, but such products should not be the only outcomes. Community engaged scholarship also produces publicly relevant results in the form of reports, exhibits, multimedia presentations, installations, policy briefs, court briefings, legislation, etc.

Engagement may go by different terminology depending on the academic and community context. A policy paper from the Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship emphasizes that “while engaged scholarship continues to be termed differently,” there remain “standards and values” that define community engaged scholarship: participatory practices, reciprocity, co-construction, democratic practices, shared authority, and shared resources.

Key Distinctions and Characteristics

No matter what terminology is used, it is important to clarify the characteristics that distinguish community engagement from several related endeavors including “community-based research” and “public scholarship.” “Community-based research” typically refers to activities that happen in a community setting *without* the requirement of a reciprocal relationship between a university and the community. “Public scholarship” is a term often used to describe the process whereby academic knowledge generated within the academy is shared with non-academics.

Community engaged scholarship is more collaborative at all stages, from the generation to the dissemination of knowledge. The expertise of off-campus community partners is recognized in the co-creation of knowledge. This shared process of knowledge development shifts community groups from being spectators watching the research and teaching processes to serving as collaborators in knowledge generation and problem solving. Co-creation also shifts students from being passive consumers to civic actors and knowledge producers.

How Higher Education Can Fulfill Its Democratic Aspirations

A clear and widely shared definition of community engaged scholarship is essential for the evolution of higher education. Such a shared understanding is the essential first-step in enabling campus leaders, faculty senates and unions, boards of higher education, state policymakers, and many other types of higher education-related organizations to shape and support this vital kind of scholarship. Clarifying the processes, practices, and purposes of community engaged scholarship will allow campuses to develop organizational arrangements and faculty rewards to further such efforts. The resulting policies and procedures are critical in order to recognize the scholarship of the next generation of faculty members who are increasingly from more diverse demographic backgrounds and more likely to express a commitment to community engaged scholarship.

A clear and shared definition of this kind of scholarship can also support innovation in higher education. Strengthening this work will advance teaching and research that has broad social impact, assist communities in addressing shared problems, and improve student learning. Community engaged scholarship, if defined

clearly and supported appropriately, can enable higher education to achieve its vital civic and democratic aspirations.

Read more in Lynn Blanchard and Andrew Furco, "**Faculty Engaged Scholarship: Setting Standards and Building Conceptual Clarity**," *Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship*, 2021; Matthew Hartley and John Saltmarsh, "A Brief History of the Civic Engagement Movement in American Higher Education," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement*, edited by Corey Dolgon, Tania D. Mitchell, and Timothy K. Eatman (Cambridge University Press, 2017); and John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley (eds.), *To Serve a Larger Purpose: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education* (Temple University Press, 2012).