

## Why Community Engaged Scholarship is Important to Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity in Higher Education

**Gene Corbin**, University of Massachusetts-Boston

**Prabhdeep Singh Kehal**, Brown University

**John Saltmarsh**, University of Massachusetts-Boston

On campuses across the United States today, “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.

### Faculty Diversity and Community Engaged Scholarship

Most college and universities are striving to recruit and retain faculty members from marginalized backgrounds with limited success. Even as student enrollment in institutions of higher education reflects increasing diversity, the profile of the faculty does not. The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reveals that 75% of full-time faculty in degree granting postsecondary institutions identify as white, six percent identify as Black, six percent identify as Hispanic, and less than one percent Indigenous.

These figures are disturbing because a professoriate with faculty from diverse backgrounds provides valuable mentorship and academic support for students with racially marginalized identities on campuses with predominantly white student enrollment. Research also clearly demonstrates the benefits of diversity for the cognitive and social development of *all* students.

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence faculty of color and/or women are more likely than their white and male counterparts to pursue community engaged forms of scholarship and to view the academic profession as an opportunity to influence social change for the common/public good. The rise of community engaged scholarship in higher education coincides with the rise of a new generation of scholars who complement their commitments to long-standing traditions of scholarship with diverse interests and skills. Such scholars are more likely to look for opportunities in community engaged scholarship as they pursue careers in higher education.

For example, data from the 2016-17 faculty survey administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles provides valuable insights into faculty practice. One of the questions

asks whether, in the previous three years, the faculty member “collaborated with local community on research/teaching to address their needs.” Across the entire sample, 47% of faculty answered yes. For faculty of color, 92%, 56%, and 52% of Indigenous, Latinx, and Black faculty, respectively, answered yes (as compared with 46% of white faculty). Disaggregating these faculty trends by binary gender, 50% of women answered affirmatively, compared to 43% of men.

Such findings indicate that women and faculty of color are more likely to integrate community engagement into their academic agendas. They are more likely to orient their research towards public problem-solving in local communities, and they are more likely to cite these engagement experiences as critical to their scholarly identity and purpose in the academy. Furthermore, research indicates that minoritized student groups who participate in high-impact teaching and learning with faculty—including the many forms of community engaged scholarship—are more likely to achieve academic success.

## Attracting and Retaining a Diverse Faculty

Making the connection between faculty diversity and community engaged scholarship is essential for creating institutional environments where a new and more diverse generation of faculty members can thrive. Strategies for diversifying the faculty that focus only on racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds without consideration of the new avenues of scholarship that these faculty often seek to pursue—like community engaged scholarship—fail to address the cultural changes necessary in academia to recruit and retain minoritized faculty.

Research also indicates that minoritized faculty are less likely to pursue academic careers or to remain in faculty positions on campuses where emerging forms of scholarship, including community engaged scholarship, are not valued and rewarded. If community engaged scholarship is clearly defined, fairly evaluated, and fully rewarded, the evidence suggests that faculty positions will become more appealing to minoritized faculty. Supporting community engaged scholarship is thus an important strategy for diversifying the professoriate.

## How Higher Education Can Fulfill Its Democratic Aspirations

Diversifying the faculty can help advance research that has a broad social impact, assist communities in addressing social issues, and improve student learning outcomes. Unfortunately, faculty evaluation and reward systems remain antagonistic to academic work that would fulfil these goals. Understanding the importance of community engaged scholarship as a strategy for diversifying the faculty should motivate educational leaders to shape and support community engaged scholarship. Community engaged scholarship, when enacted through a lens of equity and diversity, can enable higher education to achieve its vital civic and democratic aspirations.

**Read more in Susan Sturm, Tim Eatman, John Saltmarsh, and Adam Bush, “Full Participation: Building the Architecture for Diversity and Public Engagement in Higher Education,” *Imagining America* 17 (2011); John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley, “The Inheritance of Next Generation Engagement Scholars,” in *Publicly Engaged Scholars*, edited by Margaret Post, Elaine Ward, Nicholas Longo, and John Saltmarsh (Stylus Publishing, 2016); John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley (eds.), *To Serve a Larger Purpose: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education* (Temple University Press, 2012).**