

# Linking Research and Outreach: The Center for Engaged Scholarship

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## Abstract

*The Center for Engaged Scholarship provides mechanisms for faculty in all disciplines to extend their research and scholarly expertise beyond the university. The Center's activities include securing funding for research and teaching partnerships between faculty and community groups; organizing symposia that include participants from both within and outside academia; and working to create a university infrastructure that recognizes and rewards engaged scholarship. The aim is to unify two university goals: strengthening research and engaging with the community.*

In August 1999, as part of a comprehensive effort to integrate the University of South Florida (USF) with its communities, the College of Arts and Sciences established the Center for Engaged Scholarship. Its primary purpose is to provide mechanisms that encourage faculty to extend their disciplinary and professional expertise beyond the university. The Center consists of a faculty director who is assigned half-time to its operation and an advisory committee assembled from departments across Arts and Sciences.

Motivating the Center's formation was the Dean's conviction that, particularly as a public institution, the university was obligated to share its resources with the community. Among those resources is the scholarship of the faculty. One of the Center's guiding principles is that all faculty work, even so-called basic research, has potential applications outside academia.

Consequently, unlike many university initiatives that promote engagement, the Center for Engaged Scholarship is not exclusively geared toward disciplines that typically include a community component. In fact, the Center was initially founded as the Center for Applied Community Research, but the director was concerned that the name implied too narrow a definition of engagement; faculty who were not already community-oriented might dismiss the Center as irrelevant to them. Additionally, the reference to applied research suggested a relationship in which faculty would impose their research paradigms on the public. In contrast, engaged scholarship implies a partnership in which the community functions, not as a subject pool, but as a collaborator.

Our programs invite all researchers – basic and applied, laboratory-based and community-based – to link with the public in ways that are comfortable for them and consistent with the expectations of their departments and their fields (e.g., Edgerton 1994; Holland 1999; Keener 1999). By casting a broad net, we reach out to every

department in Arts and Sciences. Consequently, as the examples below illustrate, the Center is very eclectic in its activities. Many engagement efforts start with a problem, for example, community revitalization, and look for faculty to help address it. We start with a faculty base and look for problems. The progress we have made finding interesting problems for faculty engagement demonstrates that urging our universities to be good citizens does not compromise scholarship, but enriches it.

## **Uniting the University's Research and Engagement Agendas**

In effect, the work of the Center for Engaged Scholarship serves to unify two goals specified in the university's recent strategic plan: strengthening its standing as a research institution and engaging with the community. The two are often regarded as independent, even competing, objectives, with basic research and engaged scholarship vying for institutional support. The Center's view is that they are interdependent; we approach our institution's priorities not as engagement *and* research, but as engagement *in* research (e.g., Finkelstein 2001; Magrath 1999; Vortuba 1996). It is the search for common ground between the university's research and engagement agendas that is defining the Center's mission and activities.

Those activities fall into four broad categories. They offer faculty the potential for conventional products (e.g., grants, presentations, publications) while also tackling important community issues. From the outset, we knew that the Center's longevity would require convincing faculty, especially those new to engagement, that involvement with the public is compatible with the values of their disciplines and departments. To that end, the following categories of activity were chosen:

1. Coordinating and securing funding for faculty-community collaborations
2. Organizing multidisciplinary symposia that include faculty and community participants
3. Facilitating courses that link academic scholarship with a community-based experience
4. Working to create a university infrastructure that recognizes and rewards engaged scholarship

Our aim with each activity is to enhance faculty scholarship while also meeting a community need.

## **Discharging the Center's Mission**

The best way to explicate the Center's approach is with examples of our activities in each of the four focus areas.

***Coordinating and funding faculty-community partnerships.*** Our energies are primarily directed toward linking faculty with community partners and helping to obtain funding for their engagement projects. In this effort, we are also supporting a

third element of the university's strategic plan, fostering interdisciplinary research. Many agencies that fund engaged work require a multidisciplinary approach, including USF's own University Community Initiative (UCI). The Initiative's grant program supports engaged research and teaching. Because the Center for Engaged Scholarship is young, and the projects it has initiated are therefore new, most of the funding to date is in the form of intramural (UCI) grants.

In one project for which we received a UCI grant, faculty in Communication and Public Administration are partnering with the staff of a private, non-profit hospital. Their concern is the hospital's emergency room which has suffered for years from low employee morale and high management turnover. Hospital administrators have tried with little success to resolve the problems.

The innovation the faculty offer is a new approach to transforming the work environment, an application of a technique known as narrative therapy. The technique derives from the premise that the culture of an organization can best be understood by examining the narratives its workers use to describe it. Eliciting those narratives from the staff is the first step in improving the organizational climate. The next is helping them construct a new description of the workplace that is more functional and less problem-oriented.

Well-developed in the individual context, narrative therapy has only recently begun to be applied to organizations. Its focus on identifying and influencing prevailing stories offers a new mechanism for overcoming resistance to change and establishing a healthy work environment. Thus the partnership serves both to resolve the practical problems of the hospital and to advance theory and practice in the field of organizational change.

The Center also brought together faculty and graduate students from Communication and Sociology and the staff of a domestic abuse shelter to conduct an ethnographic study of the shelter. The university participants are volunteering at the shelter while observing and interviewing the staff and recording their stories; most of the staff were themselves victims of spouse abuse.

The project is academically significant in examining domestic violence from the perspective of shelter staff. Another important aspect of the partnership is that the shelter's director is a co-principle investigator. Initially, she was reluctant to work with university researchers. In her view, the academic literature *pathologizes* battered women, suggesting that they are somehow to blame for being beaten and staying in abusive relationships. She considers battering a socio-political problem that can only be understood and solved by listening to the women's stories.

The team will publish the stories, along with field notes and observations, and distribute them to entities involved with abuse issues (medical, legal, social). The expectation is that the shelter workers' own words will help to frame domestic

violence as a social problem and counter prevailing stereotypes of abused women. USF's University Community Initiative also funds this study.

Recently, the Center helped scholars in Africana Studies and Anthropology obtain a UCI grant to examine the impact of redevelopment on the Tampa neighborhood of Sulphur Springs. The Tampa Housing Authority received HOPE VI funds to demolish several housing projects, and a disproportionate number of those whose homes were razed moved to Sulphur Springs. It was anticipated that leaving the projects would be a positive experience, but many who migrated to Sulphur Springs report being made to feel unwelcome by the long-term residents.

The study will examine the impact on the area of the changing population. Partners in this effort include the staff of the neighborhood recreation center and a non-profit foundation that provides recreational, educational, and vocational assistance to underserved youth. The alliance will also serve as an example of action research as efforts are made to help the new arrivals build social capital in their new community. After the project is underway, the Center will work with the partners on a grant application to the Department of Housing and Urban Development; their intention is to conduct a longitudinal study of Tampa's displaced populations.

The Center views the intramural funding it helps secure as seed money for pilot studies that ultimately should generate external support. Our resources are available to assist faculty in selecting potential grantors and navigating the application process. We are establishing a library of materials from foundations that fund engaged scholarship and are organizing workshops to teach interested faculty the complexities of conducting research with community partners.

In addition, we bring representatives of granting agencies to campus to discuss funding opportunities related to engagement. For example, the director of the National Science Foundation's program on Innovation and Organizational Change spoke on "NSF, Funding Priorities, and the Role of Engagement." She described several programs at NSF that, like hers, require a theoretical foundation, a multidisciplinary collaboration, and partners outside academia. Similarly, we sponsored several workshops by the staff of the Florida Humanities Council. The Council's grants are a perfect example of the blending of research and engagement because they simultaneously support faculty scholarship and its dissemination to the community.

External grants will not only finance specific studies, but will also sustain the Center which, due to university-wide budget cuts, is losing its funding from the College of Arts and Sciences. Consequently, our immediate concern is to secure grants that will cover the Center's operating costs while supporting faculty projects.

***Organizing symposia.*** A second area of emphasis for the Center is organizing symposia on topics of interest to the community. The programs are multidisciplinary and include community and university participants. The symposia help publicize existing

university-community partnerships and provide opportunities for new collaborations.

Our entry into this arena was a grant to the Center from the local NBC-TV affiliate. The station was seeking faculty to conduct a content analysis of campaign ads in the 2000 elections. The news department wondered whether candidates would use available technologies to generate multiple ads on a single issue and then selectively air them according to the demographics of the viewing audience. We awarded the funds to a research team from Political Science and Psychology. They monitored television advertisements for the presidential race and for Florida's U.S. Senate, Education Commissioner, and Insurance Commissioner races.

While the study was in progress, we decided to present the findings to the public as part of a day-long symposium on the elections. Entitled "The Media and the Messages: Covering and Campaigning in the 2000 Elections," the event examined how the convergence of longstanding media (print and broadcast TV) and newer forms (the Internet and cable) affected the campaigns and the reporters who covered them. Participants included USF faculty in Mass Communications, Political Science, and Psychology; the political editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*; the assistant news director of the NBC-TV affiliate; and faculty from the Poynter Institute for Media Studies where we held the event. The keynote speaker was Ken Bode, Dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and a special correspondent for CNN.

Next on our agenda is a symposium examining the impact of Tampa's redevelopment plans on the Cuban neighborhood of Ybor City. Although buildings of historic and cultural significance are threatened, publicity about the changes has overwhelmingly focused on the economic benefits they will bring to Tampa. Little attention has been paid to the concomitant loss in valued institutions and sense of community for area residents.

Panelists in the symposium, which we are calling "Is This Progress: A Symposium on Urban Growth and Change," will include scholars with expertise in urban planning and community development, neighborhood representatives, city housing officials, and historic preservationists. As part of the program we will explore ways in which all parties can work together to guarantee a future for Ybor City's history and culture.

***Developing experiential learning opportunities.*** Just as the Center strives to blur the distinctions between engagement and research, so too we encourage faculty to incorporate engaged scholarship into their teaching. To this end, we are helping faculty to obtain funding for courses that include an experiential learning component. One example is the director's service-learning course, "The Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS." The impetus for the class was the growing public perception nationwide that university research has no relevance outside academia (e.g., Coor 1999; Mathews 1996; Sullivan 1996).

Students study social psychology in the classroom while volunteering throughout the semester at a local AIDS service organization. Their tasks are (1) to frame within the context of social psychology theory and research the issues confronting the staff and clients and (2) to use the research findings to try to develop possible solutions. The aim is to compel students to examine ways in which basic research can be put to practical use (e.g., Magrath 1999). For example, one student used principles of persuasion theory to suggest possible improvements in the effectiveness of the HIV-testing department's pre- and post-test counseling. Another adapted principles of social facilitation theory to the operation of the food pantry in an effort to reduce the stigma some clients associate with using it.

The course has been underwritten by grants from USF's Center for Teaching Enhancement and the College of Arts and Sciences. Next year, support will come from the University Community Initiative. The funds are primarily used to hire graduate teaching assistants, thus allowing us to educate future faculty about the benefits of bringing engagement into the classroom.

The Center is preparing a grant with the faculty in one of USF's Learning Communities. Students in this group will help a civic organization charged with managing 160 acres of environmentally sensitive and historically significant land. The state of Florida recently purchased the property to protect it from commercial development, and the community plans to maintain it as an outdoor learning center. Students will craft a public program and supporting materials relating to Florida's history, cultures, and environment and stressing the influence that each has had on the others.

We also assist faculty with grants for community-based courses that are linked to engaged research. For example, with funding from the University Community Initiative, a faculty member in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences is developing a course in conjunction with the Sulphur Springs study described above. "Sulphur Springs: Understanding the consequences of HOPE VI relocation through community engagement" will provide an opportunity for students to apply urban studies theory and methodology to a neighborhood in transition. Students will work with youngsters at the neighborhood recreation center, organizing activities and interviewing the children about their relocation experiences. The students and children will then develop a protocol and interview other new arrivals to Sulphur Springs.

*Recognizing and rewarding engaged scholarship.* This last goal stems from our mission to integrate research and engagement at USF. One barrier between faculty and community is a perception that engaged work is somehow less scholarly than traditional research (e.g., Silka 1999). University reward structures (e.g., promotion and tenure, departmental resources, faculty development funds) foster this attitude. Much of the problem stems from uncertainty about what engaged scholarship is and how to evaluate it. Engagement activities are often interdisciplinary; they involve non-university collaborations; and familiar indices of quality, such as publications in mainstream disciplinary journals, do not always apply.

However, a large literature persuasively argues that the distinctions universities make - either implicitly or explicitly - between traditional and engaged scholarship are unnecessary (e.g., Boyer 1990; Finkelstein 2001; Glassick et al. 1997; Lynton 1995). As co-chair of a university committee seeking to create a culture that values engagement, the Center's director is introducing this literature to the university (Finkelstein, 2001). In the spring of 2001, the committee prepared a document that offers strategies for promoting engagement at the department, college, and university levels. The paper includes examples of university-community collaborations at USF and describes their impact on both the faculty and the community partners. The examples are powerful evidence that when faculty incorporate the experience and expertise of the community into their work, their own scholarship is enhanced (e.g., Checkoway 1997; Kellett & Goldstein 1999; Ramaley 1998).

## Conclusion

The Center for Engaged Scholarship seeks to build partnerships in which academic scholarship joins forces with community expertise. By tackling problems that span all fields and all methodological approaches, the Center is demonstrating that engagement is not the exclusive province of community-centered disciplines. Faculty who have never considered collaborating with non-academic entities are given opportunities, not only to help the community, but also to enrich their own work. In this way, the Center is helping to dispel the notion of engagement and research as mutually exclusive efforts; faculty do not need to choose between the demands of their disciplines and the satisfaction of working on pressing social problems.

Increasingly, this country's metropolitan universities are making engagement with the community part of their institutional missions. Marketing engagement to traditional researchers is a new approach to fulfilling that mission and one that is setting the course for the Center for Engaged Scholarship.

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