

# Reconciling the Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Community Engagement: A Scholar's Dilemma

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## Abstract

*Institutions of higher education and their scholars struggle to reconcile the cognitive and affective dimensions involved in community engagement. In support of this concept, results are presented of a formative evaluation of a Community Outreach Partnership Center in Ypsilanti, Michigan, funded by HUD. Recommendations are suggested for organizational changes that may reduce the level of dissonance for faculty and institutions of higher education involved in community building and civic engagement endeavors.*

The definition of cognitive and affective dimensions is a collection of terms relevant to understanding human behavior. A good starting place is the idea of consciousness. Webster's Dictionary (1979) identifies four elements of consciousness: (1) Sensation, which is the immediate consequence of sensory stimulation; (2) Emotion, which is the affective, or feeling, aspect of consciousness. That which is affective is the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion; (3) Volition, which is the act of making a choice or decision; and (4) Thought, which is cogitation and conception. Thought, according to Webster, is the capacity, function, or process of forming or understanding ideas or abstractions, or their symbols. Closely related to cogitation is the word cognitive, which means capable of being reduced to empirical factual knowledge.

From this collection of terms, and for the purpose of this article, the contrast between *affective* and *cognitive* is taken to be as follows. *Affective* is a subjective state or aspect of consciousness that arises as the body prepares for action. Presumably, the background here is that sensations arise from hormonal and other physiological changes that occur as we prepare to act, and these sensations are reflected in consciousness as "affect." *Cognitive*, on the other hand, has to do with mental constructs which are both emotional and intellectual. These are based on empirical factual knowledge and relate to the meaning of what we perceive in reality.

# Conceptual Framework

Since the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land-Grant College Act, many public and land-grant universities in large cities have claimed an “urban” or “metropolitan” mission. This mission was based on the recognition that the destinies of the campus and the community were inevitably intertwined (Berube 1978). Although these universities valued public service, the main view was that knowledge was exported from the academy to the community, and not vice versa. As a matter of fact, many universities saw the service mission of the land-grants as an extension service function while the “rest of the institution joined in graduate education and research” (Ross 2002). As time went by, this value has become re-interpreted and expanded to match more a view of reciprocity and mutual benefit. This new view gave way to the concept of community engagement (Finklestein 2001). Community engagement is defined as an activity where a combination of faculty, staff, students, and community members work collectively to address important, and sometimes urgent, societal problems that arise out of daily community life (Rosaen, Foster-Fishman, and Fear 2002).

As funding became available to build and sustain this concept, universities began to feel the pressure to demonstrate that they are contributing to the economic development of a region and to the enhancement of social fabric and community capacity through campus-community partnerships (Holland 2001). Across the country, universities have been trying to put into practice what Boyer (1990) called “the scholarship of engagement.” That is, to become engaged by connecting their teaching and research to the outside world.

Unfortunately, many universities still subscribe to the view that service is largely unimportant and irrelevant to the advancement of knowledge through scientific research, which they see as the true purpose of higher education. Unlike research and teaching, which are often individual endeavors, the challenge of community engagement is that it is a collaborative activity that is dependent on true partnerships with individuals, groups, and organizations external to the university.

There is a large body of literature related to community engagement indicating that the prevailing model of professionalism within academia neglects community practice and minimizes the importance of the scholarship of engagement. This neglect leads to a failure to appreciate and tap the wisdom that exists in people who do not share faculty’s professional credentials (Klay, Brower, and Williams 2001; Amen 2001; Finkelstein 2001; Holland 2001; Alter and Book 2001; Klay, Brower, and Williams 2001).

In 1915, for example, Abraham Flexner, a leader in professional education, told social workers that they could not claim to be a profession because they mostly engaged in mobilizing and coordinating other professions. He further declared that social work could not be deemed a profession if the knowledge it utilized was distilled from clients in clinical practice. Knowledge gained in this manner, he asserted, lacked the

theoretical coherence characteristic of a science (Stivers 2000). Academic leaders argued that such coherence emerged through university-based research, through systematic “scientific” inquiry, rather than from clinical experience in the field (Austin 1983). Proponents of community engagement methodologies and perspectives argue that theory is often unrealistically abstracted from reality and that adequate theory can only be built through rigorous reflections based on the richness of field observation and experience (Klay, Brower, and Williams 2001).

Pfeffer (1993) observes that the prevailing model of academic professionalism is unrealistically individualistic. He stresses that it is based on an understanding of inquiry that presents scientific discovery as if it were an exercise in cold logic, absent from the social dimension. The prevailing model rewards research far more than good teaching or service. It also encourages specialization, to the detriment of multidisciplinary “sensemaking.”

As support for community engagement becomes stronger, universities are realizing that in order to truly become engaged with the community, they need to reorganize their institutional thinking about service so that engagement becomes a priority and part of their university’s mission (Finkelstein 2001; Amen 2001; Alter, and Book 2001; Klay, Brower, and Williams 2001). This situation generates a struggle between what universities affectively feel as incompatible purposes, but cognitively view as a civic responsibility.

As a rule, faculty who are interested in community engagement bring with them a desire to help people and their communities. They believe that to contribute to the economic development of the community and to the enhancement of social capital, it is vital to acknowledge that knowledge and expertise can also flow from “town to gown.” However, they also bring with them a set of beliefs shaded by having been raised in a society that values individualism and personal success. As they enter academia, individualism is further reinforced by a culture of autonomy, individual performance, and by the traditional research paradigm of expert vs. subject. The degree to which these belief systems contribute to, or more often interfere with, the building of true community engagement and equal partnerships, is of concern to proponents of this concept in institutions of higher education.

Cognitively, faculty realize that unique scholarly contributions lie in collaborative work with the community. They may help understand and define societal issues better and create new approaches to study and solve deeply rooted societal problems. Affectively, this realization runs counter to their lifelong approach to life and to the conventional norms in academia where autonomy reigns, and a clear distinction is maintained between the researcher and research subjects, and where community engagement as scholarship is not valued or legitimized by inclusion in university tenure and promotion systems.

Frequently, faculty feel they have resolved the dissonance by developing materials and assignments within their course content that require community work. However, these

assignments usually impose the academic agenda rather than uncover and address community needs. While faculty are operating from a cognitive model that acknowledges engagement, they may still be operating from their affective perspective distilled from past experience and world view. Dissonance between cognitive knowledge and this affective perspective can lead to the compartmentalization of knowledge, effectively sealing it off from behavior.

We would suggest that the crux of university-community engagement lies in operating from both the cognitive and the affective domains. In order to marry these domains, people need to develop and feel a sense of community. They need social ties, especially those that help to provide a sense of identity, meaning, professional authority, and purpose (Selznick 1992). The authors of this paper suggest that without attending to the formation of attitudes, attachments, impulses, habits, and emotional responses, faculty are not attaining their goal of increasing understanding of community engagement. Moreover, this goal is difficult to achieve without the university bringing engagement from the periphery to the center of academic activity.

## **Case Illustration**

To illustrate the above concept, we will describe the community-engagement activities of faculty involved in a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) at Eastern Michigan University. This center, funded for three years by the Housing and Urban Development Office (HUD), was established to promote effective relationships between Eastern Michigan University (EMU) and Ypsilanti that can become permanent community institutions to meet the needs and quality of life aspirations of the citizens of Ypsilanti. At the time of this writing, the COPC has been in existence for one and one-half years, with one and one-half years left to establish the Center as a self-sufficient, permanent institution, before Federal funds are depleted.

From the beginning, EMU leaders set a good example by partnering with the community in putting together this grant. In this partnership, community citizens and leaders took responsibility for selecting the areas that they deemed needed to be addressed by funding from this grant. After months of meetings and the involvement of more than 50 Ypsilanti residents, public officials, community leaders, and EMU faculty, the community whittled down from 30 possible topics eligible for COPC funding to three specific activity domains. These domains included: (1) Community Building and Civic Engagement, (2) Education and Youth Leadership Development, and (3) Economic Development and Employment. Each activity domain has projects under it, for a total of seven projects, with individual EMU faculty project directors and a community advisory group affixed to each. The project teams, which involve EMU faculty and community partners, work to accomplish project goals. The COPC is administered by a project director, a co-director, and a center evaluator. Project Directors and administrators meet monthly to share their progress, comment and seek advice on any emergent issues where they need assistance from their peers, review their budget, go over project evaluation plans, and to bounce ideas and plans for new project activities.

# **The Rocky Road to Community Engagement**

One of the great values of the work with the COPC is that it immerses faculty in the community culture. Partnering with the community means that they are not only being deprived of the familiar academic supports that define their professional life, but also are being thrust into a cultural setting to which they are not accustomed or may not even understand. They have to share power, control, and in most instances, become a “learner.” This experience strips them of their ability to communicate their academic knowledge and competence in an authoritative way. Faculty are thrust into a vulnerable state where they have to create a new identity and a credible status for themselves, and in a situation where they may not initially understand the “rules” for doing so. For faculty accustomed to being the “authority,” this can be a crushing but unforgettable lesson.

When faculty at the COPC prepared themselves for this experience, they did not expect it to be different from the community work in which they have been engaged where they and their students would seek community support to conduct surveys, do volunteer work, and then come back to complete their papers or assignments. Although they looked forward to working with the community, they underestimated the differences and factors they would encounter in a true partnership, and seriously underestimated their vulnerability and lack of standing.

At the beginning of the program, faculty project directors threw themselves into their projects with their community partners. As their projects evolved, faculty responded in a variety of ways to the loss of power and challenge to their competence that occurred. Faculty members, for instance, befriended, sought, and obtained the support of community leaders. However, there was a tendency to continue to play a dominant leadership role. Often, they single-handedly chaired the meetings and led community citizens to accomplish their project’s goals. Regardless of the cognitive knowledge that the project was to be an equal partnership, on occasion they would fall back into the traditional “expert vs. subject” mode of operation which was affectively more comfortable and familiar.

As we process these issues in discussions at monthly meetings, cognitively, faculty are reaffirming their knowledge and understanding of the importance of community engagement. Affectively, faculty are beginning to internalize, feel comfortable, and appreciate the meaning of a true partnership. As they continue to work with their community partners, they are learning that, most times, in community engagement it is the faculty, *not the community partner*, who must attempt to adjust and understand the community context.

## **Evaluation of the COPC**

The first COPC evaluation provided an assessment of the first six months of the project in an effort to document progress, identify problems, clarify objectives, and develop corrective actions where needed.

## Reflections of Dissonance

The divergence that is produced as a result of the dichotomy between the cognitive and affective dimensions of community engagement was reflected in several dimensions of the evaluation results. While the EMU partners consistently indicated that their projects have strong communication channels and clear, focused objectives, the results indicate that the community partners had a somewhat different perspective of the same projects and activities.

Table 1 displays the summary of responses to items asked about the project objectives. It indicates that although a majority of respondents indicate that there is satisfactory progress being made toward clear objectives that the team is focused on, there is a clear disparity between the EMU partners and the community partners in this area. All but one EMU partner responded positively to all items on project objectives. However, about a third of the community partners disagreed or were unsure about what the project objectives are and whether the team was focused on them. Even more disconcerting is that only about half of the community partners agreed that the team was making satisfactory progress toward the objectives.

**Table 1. EMU and Community Partners' perceptions of capacity of project to define and reach project objectives**

Measures of Project Capacity to Define and Reach Objectives	EMU PARTNERS			COMMUNITY PARTNERS		
	Percent Strongly Agree or Agree (n)	Percent Neither Agree nor Disagree (n)	Percent Disagree or Strongly Disagree (n)	Percent Strongly Agree or Agree (n)	Percent Neither Agree nor Disagree (n)	Percent Disagree or Strongly Disagree (n)
The objectives are clear to me	93.3 (14)	6.7 (1)	0.0 (0)	66.7 (12)	16.7 (3)	16.7 (3)
The team is focused on the project objectives	100.0 (15)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	66.7 (12)	22.2 (4)	11.2 (2)
The team is making satisfactory progress toward the objectives	93.3 (14)	6.7 (1)	0.0 (0)	55.6 (10)	38.9 (7)	5.6 (1)

Similarly, in response to an open-ended question asking them to describe indications that their project was or was not making progress toward its objectives, about 13 percent of EMU partners did not respond or indicated they did not know how to make this assessment; however, almost 40 percent of community partners did not indicate how they know whether or not the project is making progress toward its objectives (see Table 2).

**Table 2. EMU and Community partners’ perceptions of progress toward objectives**

<b>Indication of progress toward objectives</b>	<b>Percent of EMU partners (n)</b>	<b>Percent of community partners (n)</b>	<b>Percent of all respondents (n)</b>
Progress clearly indicated in project	53.4 (8)	50.0 (9)	51.5 (17)
Experienced diversions in progress	33.3 (5)	11.1 (2)	21.2 (7)
No response or Don’t know	13.3 (2)	48.9 (7)	27.3 (9)
Total	100.0 (15)	100.0 (18)	100.0 (33)

A similar pattern is indicated in Table 3, which summarizes the responses to a question asking if changes had become necessary so far in the project design or implementation. Less than 40 percent of the community partners agreed with this statement while over 70 percent of the university partners concurred. This disparity again reflects the general theme of community partners having a very different perception of the project concepts and operations from those of the faculty. Moreover, university partners clearly detailed the changes that had occurred in their projects in an open-ended follow-up question. The patterns of these responses suggest that the community partners had less knowledge about the concepts and operations of their projects than did the university partners. The community partners also indicated a greater lack of clarity on the project objectives.

**Table 3. EMU and Community Partners’ perceptions of changes in project**

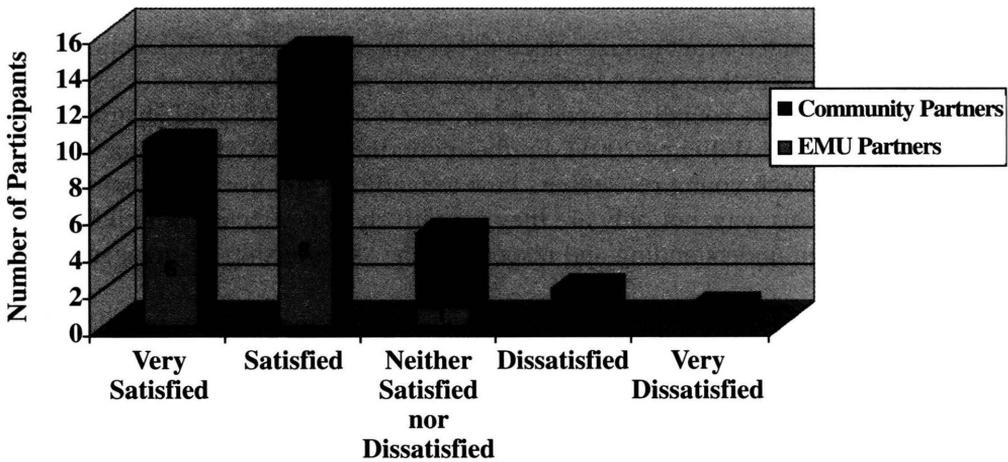
<b>Measures of Project Changes</b>	<b>EMU PARTNERS</b>			<b>COMMUNITY PARTNERS</b>		
	<b>Percent Strongly Agree or Agree (n)</b>	<b>Percent Neither Agree nor Disagree (n)</b>	<b>Percent Disagree or Strongly Disagree (n)</b>	<b>Percent Strongly Agree or Agree (n)</b>	<b>Percent Neither Agree nor Disagree (n)</b>	<b>Percent Disagree or Strongly Disagree (n)</b>
<b>Since the project began, changes to the project design or implementation have become necessary</b>	<b>73.3 (11)</b>	<b>26.7 (4)</b>	<b>0.0 (0)</b>	<b>38.9 (7)</b>	<b>55.6 (10)</b>	<b>5.6 (1)</b>

To determine how participants feel about the value of their contributions, participants were asked to assess how satisfied they were with their role in the project so far. Their responses are summarized in Figure 1. Two conclusions are immediately apparent from this summary. First, there is a high level of project role satisfaction among the respondents in general. Of the 33 respondents, only five were neutral about their satisfaction level and just three were dissatisfied. However, it is also clear that a much

greater proportion of the reported satisfaction is held by the university participants. Seven of the eight respondents who did not report satisfaction are community partners. To determine what factors were likely to influence the project satisfaction level, respondents were asked to describe what had been satisfying or unsatisfying about their role in the project so far. These responses clearly indicated that high satisfaction was associated with seeing the project achieving objectives, enjoyment of the work and/or colleagues both in the university and community, and feeling their role in the project is important and valued. Dissatisfied respondents reported that they did not feel valued or integrated in the project, and they were unclear about their role in it.

**Figure 1. Number of respondents in project satisfaction categories (n = 33)**

**Participant Satisfaction Level with Project Role**



**Implications for Partnerships**

The most pervasive challenging pattern indicated throughout these results is a disparity between EMU and community partners on perceptions of their knowledge about the project, clarity of their roles in it, and feelings of making a valuable contribution to the projects. Though the numbers of uncertain or discontented partners are not large, the patterns give warning of frustration within the community partners that can lead easily to erosion of project partnerships and their missions. Overall, the results of this evaluation provide support and illustration of the phenomenon in which the university partners often inadvertently minimize the community partner’s role. While faculty may value their community partner’s role, they have not yet learned to effectively engage them.

## **Recommendations**

- 1) Some universities, Eastern Michigan included, have revised their mission to include community engagement and have set as one of their priorities the meaningful integration of the University with their external community. However, in order for faculty to internalize the benefits of community work, this mission needs to be integrated in the evaluation documents at all levels, including the departments and other units within the university.
- 2) The outcomes and transformations that occur on campus and in communities must be measured. A comprehensive assessment of the scholarship of engagement needs to be conducted that generates information about performance that can be fed back into the university system. To promote continued support, the benefits of community engagement must be demonstrated.
- 3) Community-oriented academicians need to become reflective practitioners. Use-inspired basic research requires introspection from professional practice as true modes of inquiry are socially framed and are not solely exercises of abstract logic (Klay, Brower, and Williams 2001). Furthermore, they need to develop new pedagogies to teach young researchers how to facilitate and use their communities of practice. In this way, not only are they cognitively, but affectively, building in their students an understanding and respect for the “scholarship of engagement.”
- 4) University administrators also need to become engaged in reflective practice. Since it is they who administer the reward and incentive structures, they need to recognize the value of community-oriented academic professionalism. It is no secret that reflectively led universities are more likely to be more innovative and of greater service to the student, faculty, and the community (Klay, Brower, and Williams 2001).
- 5) A hallmark of use-inspired basic research must be its rigor and quality. The prevailing paradigm views community involvement as a diversion from the central research mission. As a result, the best way to assure this quality is rigorous standards and rigorous peer review. The argument can be made that becoming more community-oriented opens doors for research. It taps neglected wisdom and provides a framework for testing theory in actual application.
- 6) Some universities, Eastern Michigan included, have revised their mission to include community engagement and have set as one of their priorities the meaningful integration of the University with their external community. However, in order for faculty to internalize the benefits of community work, this mission needs to be integrated in the evaluation documents at all levels including the departments and other units within the university.

## Conclusions

We have made a case that in academia, faculty recognize the need to engage in community work. Affectively, however, they come from an individualistic society and professional perspective that rewards autonomy and individual accomplishments. American faculty are still rewarded if they publish in a narrow discipline. This thrust is even stronger for junior faculty who are vying for tenure. Faculty involved in community work usually come from outside the communities they are studying. As a result, stereotypes and social distance alters what is observed, how it is interpreted, and what is produced as knowledge, resulting in partial or misleading knowledge. Faculty must understand and accept that community building partnerships begin with collective definition of the issues, collective searches for information, and collaboration in selecting and implementing solutions. Working directly with the community takes faculty and students outside of the formal classroom, therefore, requiring them to alter the traditional way they teach. Cox (2000:17) observes that “no longer the sole source of information for students, faculty members must develop new methods to guide discovery and learning. Partnerships, by definition, require students and faculty members to collaborate with community residents and stakeholders. Doing so teaches project collaboration and collaborative learning.” Cox adds that in community work a more fundamental affective impact occurs on faculty and students. As they experience engagement firsthand, they begin to feel and understand their interrelationships and connectedness of all in society. This is when the marriage and reconciliation of the cognitive and affective dimensions finally begins to occur.

Similarly, institutions of higher education must redirect their efforts to include the impact that community engagement has on the creation of knowledge. To be successful in this endeavor, however, requires overcoming internal barriers to engagement. Theory-driven and typically laboratory-based, traditional researchers view their work as cutting-edge scholarship that adds to the knowledge base of a field. Engaged, problem-driven scholars view themselves as tackling complex societal problems that do not conform to narrow disciplinary models or lead to advances in theory on publications in top academic journals. The authors of this article contend that both approaches are crucial to the success of a metropolitan research university. Both need to be valued and rewarded within the academy.

Universities have been criticized for their failure to address issues confronting US urban communities (Amen 2001; Holland 2001; Boyer 1990; Harkavy 1997; Pfeffer 1993; Ross 2002). In his work tracing the history of scientific discovery, Stokes (1997) identified four types of research and resulting knowledge. Two were the traditional basic and applied, and basic research relates the results back to theory. The third type, which is guided by and informs only the investigator, is what he called investigator curiosity. The fourth type was *use-inspired basic research*, which involves both theory and application. Stokes asserted that projects or policies are shaped by the needs and opportunities within communities and that the lessons learned from applied research is not only whether these projects or policies worked or failed, but why. Rose (1991, 1993) stresses that answers to questions about whether or how a project or policy

worked require concepts and relationships that can be generalized across time and space. That requires theory. Use-inspired basic research thus gives rise to the development of theory. Innes (1995) asserts that, rather than separate types of research and knowledge, use-inspired basic research creates both applied and basic knowledge.

Supporting Innes' assertion, a rich body of literature indicates that the distinction that universities make either implicitly or explicitly between traditional and engaged scholarship is unnecessary. This literature points to the idea that a single set of evaluative criteria applicable to all forms of scholarship can be developed and that community engagement does not compromise but enriches scholarship (Glassic, Huber, and Maeroff 1997; Diamond and Adam 1995; Lynton 1995; Driscoll and Lynton 1999).

To reconcile the cognitive and affective dimensions of community engagement in academia is a challenge. To meet this challenge, institutions of higher education as well as their scholars need to critically re-examine their practices of engagement. We concur with Boyer (1996), who indicates that universities and faculty need to bring new dignity to the scholarship of engagement by connecting their rich research rigor, experience, and resources to social, civic, ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers, and to our cities. It is only when we marry the cognitive theory-driven and traditional research with the affective real life complex societal problems and solutions that we will truly become engaged universities.

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