

Pursuing Engaged Scholarship in an Age of Austerity: A Postcard from Memphis

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Abstract

Growing numbers of presidents and senior administrators have come to understand the value of having a robust public scholarship agenda as part of their institutional vision. Yet, ever-shrinking resources can make engaged scholarship seem like a risky proposition for young faculty members. What does it take to get them to leave the high ground of traditional positivist research and wade in the muddy waters of engagement and advocacy? What is at stake when they do?

First, let me say what a pleasure it is to be here today. I am humbled to be chosen for the 2011 Lynton Award and to be part of NERCHE and Coalition for [Urban and] Metropolitan Universities' efforts to promote community-university engagement. It is an honor to follow in Ernest Lynton's footsteps.

Think of this talk as a virtual postcard that describes a future itinerary of university-community relationships from the perspective of an engaged scholar working in the institutional and project contexts of Memphis. Appropriately, Memphis has long been a stopping off point, and in many cases a settling point, for people, art forms, ideas, and products moving into and out of the Mississippi Delta. The images on the front of this postcard might recall the musical tradition of the blues and Stax Records; the Mississippi River; civil rights leaders like Ida B. Wells, Benjamin Hooks, or the Reverend Billy Kyles; and leading educational institutions, including the University of Memphis. In addition to possessing these notable community assets (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993), the city also faces what, at times, seem like intractable problems. High rates of poverty, low high school completion numbers, high incidence of obesity and diabetes, affordable housing shortages, and growing foreclosures represent real challenges to the economic, social, and physical well-being of the city. Against a backdrop like this, the possibilities for building applied, collaborative research relationships between universities and communities are immense.

For more than thirty years, visionaries like Ernest Lynton, Ernest Boyer, Ira Harkavy, Peter Levine, Barbara Holland, Nancy Cantor, and others have successfully called on and led institutions of higher education to embrace community-university engagement in ways that could address these sorts of issues. Yet the recent recession and ongoing funding cuts to higher education, as well as the attrition of experienced engaged

scholars into administration and/or retirement, potentially threaten the continued advancement of the civic engagement movement within higher education. Meanwhile, the ever-growing breadth and depth of the challenges facing our communities suggest the need for expanded relationships and bold approaches, ones that put advocacy and social justice front and center in universities' broader engagement agendas. Thus, we are at a crossroads. But, how did we get here? And, what is our next move?

A View from the Crossroads

The movement in higher education toward civic engagement and engaged scholarship can be linked back to the creation of National Campus Compact in 1985 (Cox 2000). Subsequent support in the 1990s came from federal programs like Housing and Urban Development's Community Outreach Partnership Center program (COPC) (LeGates and Robinson 1998) and The Corporation for National and Community Service's AmeriCorps-VISTA program. These coalitions and funding sources were catalysts for higher education to embark upon building meaningful relationships with the community (Cox 2010). In doing so, colleges and universities across the country have taken different approaches to both doing and institutionalizing community-university engagement. Universities like the University of Pittsburgh, University of Chicago, and University of Pennsylvania have become developers, partnering with local governments, community development corporations, and community groups to reintegrate and rehabilitate blocks and neighborhoods around their campuses (Perry and Wiewel 2005). Other universities have developed broad-based relationships with local communities, functioning as information hubs, dissemination engines, and conveners of think tanks and public forums (Barker 2004). Still others have become facilitators of direct service through participatory action projects like the University of Illinois East St. Louis Action Research Project (Reardon 1998, 2000) or the Near Westside Initiative at Syracuse University (Cantor 2011). Strategies for institutionalizing service learning are equally varied, including insertion into long-term strategic plans, designation of executive staff as community liaisons, creation of faculty committees, establishment of centers of community partnership, building service learning and engagement into curricular requirements, and the development of awards and recognition at both the university and college levels.

The first three decades of the civic-engagement movement resulted in a critical mass of deeply experienced first- and second-generation faculty, staff, and community partners, many of whom are now aging or being promoted off of the front lines. While such attrition has created a palpable void in some institutions and departments, others have taken steps to ensure sustainability. For example, Portland and Michigan State Universities have developed formal mechanisms to incorporate and train graduate students in the scholarship of engagement (Doberneck, Brown, and Allen 2010). Importantly, these emerging scholars come into their first academic jobs with the mind- and skill-set ready for and expecting engagement and additional professional development opportunities (Allen and Moore 2010). Additionally, organizations like New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE), Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU), and the Association of American Colleges and

Universities (AACU) have excelled as conduits for institutions and faculty, assessing the practices and structures of engagement and connecting engaged scholars from across the country.

Such national networks and supports are all the more important, as colleges and universities tighten their belts and take austerity measures. Hiring freezes, cuts in faculty lines, elimination of departments, rising student tuition, and reductions in employee benefits and support for conference travel and training are accompanied by higher education's increased emphasis on recruitment and retention of students and ensuring that curricula build practical and employable skills and knowledge. At the same time, universities are increasingly being asked by their cities and towns to use their intellectual and human capital to assist nonprofits and local governments in figuring out how to fill the gaps left by retracting public and private funding sources and social spending policies.

Arguably, the conditions of this demand-resource paradox are ripe for university engagement to flourish. Moreover, they provide an opportunity for institutions of higher education to boldly embark on the next frontier in university-community relationships—social justice-centered engaged scholarship. By this I mean, engagement that focuses on:

Examining the broad systemic factors that contribute to the causes and continuation of social inequities, and explores the means to undertake multilevel transformation that not only addresses the apparent causes of problems, but also challenges the assumptions and mindsets that sustain the problematic conditions (Chambers and Gopaul 2010, 63).

Drawing on my experiences as an engaged scholar over the last four years, I will outline what forms of disciplinary, departmental, and institutional structures and supports are key to encouraging early career faculty to forge this new path.

Engagement with Advocacy and Social Justice in Mind

In keeping with pedagogies of engagement, which stress debriefing, reflection, analysis, and application of one's community-based experiences (Saltmarsh 2010), I will begin by contextualizing my own trajectory as an engaged scholar. I am trained as an anthropologist and followed a traditional path within the discipline, traveling to Australia to do in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in an urban Aboriginal community for extended periods of time. Based on the relationships I built within the community and copious data collection, I wrote a dissertation that critically examined the power dynamics of Aboriginal-state relations and its impact on Aboriginal identity formation. Although my methodology was feminist praxis-informed, the resulting dissertation had little to offer in terms of explicit application of knowledge to the issues and challenges facing people in the community where I worked.

I was hired at the University of Memphis in 2007 as a tenure track assistant professor in an anthropology department well known for its master's program in applied anthropology. Not only did my new job description charge me with developing a local research agenda, but the university had also adopted the language of community-university engagement as a pillar of its strategic direction. Thus, I was encouraged by both my departmental mentors and university administrators to link my future scholarly endeavors to community-based research and engaged scholarship. Although I was familiar with deep community-based work, I had little experience with the kind of application and relationship building that engaged scholarship requires. Fortunately, I had some help. I became part of the Engaged Scholarship Faculty Committee, a cohort of twenty-five to thirty faculty that periodically brings together faculty from across the university that are involved in engaged projects. I also had the unanticipated opportunity to develop a research partnership with an experienced mentor and fellow Lynton Award winner, Dr. Kenneth Reardon. While I have continued to write and teach about Aboriginal Australia, my academic lens has shifted from a participatory observation and applied research paradigm to an engaged and participatory action model of research and teaching.

Since 2008, my work has primarily focused on two projects—the Strengthening Community Initiative (SCI) and The Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative. While these initiatives both use community-university partnerships to address similar urban-based issues, they provide two different vantage points. SCI creates a mechanism for fostering and institutionalizing engaged scholarship in a context in which definitions and practices of engagement are diffused across the university. The Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative is a participatory action research process that facilitates resident-led planning and revitalization in two neighborhoods, South Memphis and Vance Avenue. The former promotes and provides seed grant support for faculty-community engaged scholarship efforts in the absence of a center or office focused on civic engagement or community partnerships. The latter offers insights into engagement as democratic and social justice-centered practice. Importantly, the two initiatives share several important characteristics: community partners identified the need for the projects; the approach developed collaboratively; and both projects foreground engaged scholarship. Together, they have afforded me insights into both the institutionalization and praxis of the scholarship of engagement.

The Strengthening Communities Initiative

Now in its fourth year, SCI is a partnership between the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis, The United Way of the Mid South, and The University of Memphis Research Foundation. The program provides start-up monies for community-faculty partners with collaborative geographically-based projects to address issues such as housing, walkability, job training, cultural heritage, or beautification (to name only a few). The idea for SCI grew out of a lunch meeting with the CEO and a staff member of the local community foundation. Wanting to build on my prior relationship with the CEO and the long time partnership the foundation has with the university through the American Humanics program, I asked for the meeting in an effort to identify

internships for anthropology graduate students at the foundation and with agencies or projects they funded. As it turned out, what the foundation needed at the time was not interns, but a new way of doing small grant-making. I left that conversation knowing that what they needed was much bigger than me; and I went in search of others with additional know-how and relationships to envision the role that the university could play in a community grant-making process. SCI was the result.

Based out of the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy (SUAPP), SCI has an administrative team that includes the head of SUAPP, a faculty member from the Division of Public and Nonprofit Administration, the Director of the Institute for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership, and a faculty member from anthropology (the author). SCI reinforces the faculty-led engaged scholarship movement at the university (Norris-Tirrell, Hyland, and Lambert-Pennington 2010), embedding engaged scholarship in both its grant-making/documenting process and at the project level. Community-faculty teams work on and submit proposals that demonstrate tangible outcomes, local capacity building and policy implications, and demonstrate an engaged scholarship agenda. Students in a nonprofit administration course do an initial review of the proposals, noting strengths, weaknesses, and raising additional questions. The class' review is then turned over to an independent grant review committee who also reviews the proposals and then decides which ones to fund. Once awards are made, grantees work with the administrative team to ensure the faculty-community team is documenting its progress, measuring and evaluating the outcomes of the project effectively, and receiving technical assistance they might need. As a member of the SCI Admin Team, I have helped facilitate and evaluate the grant-making program and support faculty-community teams in documenting the impacts of their projects and articulating their engaged scholarship agendas.

The Memphis Urban Transformation Initiative

Complementing this institutional view, the intellectual, ideological, and social terrain underlying the Urban Transformation Initiative offers a bottom-up perspective on the scholarship of engagement. Following an asset-based, participatory action research strategy, the initiative focuses on creating comprehensive planning documents with stakeholders in two neighborhoods: the South Memphis Revitalization Action Plan (SoMe RAP) and the Vance Avenue Collaborative (VAC). The overarching methodology is participatory action research inspired and characterized by community investment, multi-disciplinary participation, and mixed-methods. For each project, the university team collaborates with a community-led steering committee with a mix of residents, social service providers and nonprofit organizations, local businesses, and educators. Through an on-going, readily revisable, and iterative series of research activities, including ethnographic and interactive asset mapping, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, surveys, the university team works with community stakeholders to develop a comprehensive plan for the neighborhood and action strategies for implementing programs that address participant-identified priorities. While this tangible product is important, the neighborhood planning process is perhaps more significant; it is a vehicle for community organizing, popular education, empowerment, and advocacy.

Some of the characteristics of the South Memphis and Vance projects that have relevance for engagement as democratic and social justice praxis include:

- A comprehensive and holistic approach to community issues.

The projects rely on collaboration both within and outside of the academic setting. Outreach and research focuses on facilitating and building relationships between academic departments, nonprofit organizations, local institutions, government entities, and citizens that may have previously been siloed. Within the academy, the research process explicitly connects departments and academic units across the university, as well as across colleges and universities within the city and outside of Memphis. At the community level, the projects are collaborations with residents and local institutions to explore their most pressing concerns, develop solutions, address policy barriers, and implement and evaluate resulting programs and initiatives.

- Project team members come from within and outside of the university and represent a range of experiences with engaged scholarship.

Our team includes tenured faculty with thirty years of experience, as well as novice faculty building up their track record, newly minted PhDs, and affiliated faculty from universities outside of the United States. Students involved in these projects span undergraduate to graduate students, and also include medical and nursing students from the local school of medicine and health sciences. On the community partner front, involvement includes leaders of stakeholder organizations, some of whom understand the value the university could bring to the partnership, but are not always sure what that relationship will look like, and others of whom are skeptical of the university's intentions. The project team also includes the day-to-day managers of community-based programs that want and need certain questions answered, as well as community members committed to particular issues and wanting to use their lived experience to inform and support the research efforts.

- Involvement and effort is long-term, on-going, and responsive to issues and questions that emerge from engagement.

Over the four years, the co-coordinating faculty has remained consistent (the author and Reardon), but other faculty in departments like architecture, civil engineering, social work, and public health have joined at particular times based on project needs, student interest, or request of community partners. Over two hundred students have participated in these projects. Student engagement moves along a continuum from periodic volunteerism and service learning embedded in courses to practitioner training through internships to the development of individual scholarly products like capstone projects, theses, and presentations at professional conferences. Partnerships extend beyond the project. Faculty are often invited to serve on boards, community organizations have hosted and supervised interns, as well as hosted visiting scholars and workshops. Community partners are guest speakers in classes and become nodes in broader networks.

- Data is held collectively, shared, and used for a variety of purposes within and beyond the project. Likewise, project and research products are diverse in content, review, and dissemination.

Community partners have used data and other media created through the partnership in presentations and grant applications. Faculty work with the data in their classes, use it in presentations to community and professional groups, as well as in publications. Importantly, a variety of products and dissemination strategies have resulted from these projects including planning documents, journal articles and presentations, white papers, posters, pamphlets, and videos which have been disseminated via the internet on the university website, the university's YouTube channel, community partners' websites, and face-to-face at community meetings, festivals, and other events. For example, over one thousand copies of the Executive Summary of the SoMe RAP plan were distributed to residents in the neighborhood and made available on the web. Additionally, local foundations, city government, and the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships have pointed to these projects as models of community-based collaboration. Importantly, the level of resident and local stakeholder involvement in the production of the planning documents has been cited as an example of effective citizen participation in city decision- and policy-making and in some instances used theme in making funding decisions.

- Projects have raised questions about power and inequality, the need for advocacy, policy changes, and have connected to other efforts.

Throughout the South Memphis and Vance Projects we have invited and encouraged city officials and funders to participate in community meetings to listen and respond to citizen concerns and questions as they arise. We have also facilitated meetings between residents, staff with local government agencies, and city council members to discuss alternative problem-solving strategies and resident priorities. Moreover, we include space in the classroom, community meetings, and in-house team discussions to critically reflect on issues of privilege and social inequality and their connection to projects' goals. Additionally, our project team has met with key government entities to identify policy barriers and issues that require an immediate response. For example, during the South Memphis Farmers Market, we identified three ways to expand use of nutritional benefits at farmers markets around the city. We advocated the health department to make changes to the Senior Voucher training for vendors so that seniors could more readily use their nutritional benefits. Additionally, residents identified the need for Shelby County to allow WIC recipients to use benefits at the farmers market. Finally, the South Memphis Farmers Market manager provided technical assistance to other markets on the process and equipment necessary to take Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

As the Urban Transformation Initiative suggests, doing engaged scholarship, especially using a participatory methodology and keeping an advocacy or social justice focus, requires coordinating numerous moving parts and ongoing capacity building. It seems

there are at least five things we can take from these two projects that are relevant and necessary for moving social justice-centered engagement into an institutional context: a holistic, comprehensive understanding of social issues; links between academic units; inclusive, diverse team membership, skills, and levels of experience; shared data and tangible results geared toward and vetted by many different audiences; and an explicit connection between research activities, products, advocacy, and actions. Importantly, by taking key steps to internally shore up community-university relationships, encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and creative problem-solving, and create opportunities for community partners are well versed in engaged scholarship, institutions of higher education can become crucial nodes in local problem-solving networks.

Moving Social Justice-Centered Engagement from Project to Institutional Domain

While some tensions between engaged research as practiced in the service of the academy and as practiced in service of the public remain, national rewards and recognition for engaged scholarship like the Lynton Award, the Cross Future Leaders Award, and the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll have encouraged institutional shifts. Some have come from within the form of curriculum and tenure and promotion guidelines and others from within various disciplines as they struggle to deconstruct the hierarchy of knowledge that has shaped modes of training and professional associations. Disciplinary (Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski 2011), departmental (Kecskes 2006), and institutional (Hollander, Saltmarsh, and Zlotkowski 2002) conditions are key to fostering community-university relationships, particularly when advocacy and social-justice are a focus of engagement.

Disciplinary Training and Orientation

Disciplinary training and orientation has implications for engaged scholarship in general and social justice-centered engaged scholarship in particular. Not all disciplines see applied work, much less community engagement, as a relevant or even worthwhile endeavor. While I am fortunate enough to be in a discipline that focuses on the world outside of the academy, even anthropology is divided into "basic" and "applied" scholarship. For example, within the discipline of anthropology applied/practitioner-focused work has often been criticized as a-theoretical and not academic enough. Over the past two decades, however, public anthropology has become an important aspect of the discipline. With this shift, the ways of putting anthropology to work have extended anthropologists' reach far beyond the academy. Recognizing and valuing engagement through advocacy and activism, anthropologists have been involved in protests, given expert testimony, worked as human rights advocates, and worked with residents on EPA and environmental remediation, to mention only a few (Feld and Fox 2007).

Engaged anthropology, like engaged scholarship, focuses on collaboration, outreach, advocacy, and public policy (Lamphere 2003; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006), which means that to do it successfully requires different types of products and methods of dissemination, not all of which are formally recognized by the discipline or the academy. The Consortium for Practicing and Applied Anthropology Programs has just written and adopted guidelines for documenting, promoting, and evaluating applied and engaged scholarship (Khanna et.al. 2008). Yet, for faculty working outside of practitioner or applied fields, such as departments of civil engineering or chemistry, engaged scholarship may be totally unexplored territory. Adding community engagement, particularly if it takes on an advocacy or activist character, to disciplines steeped in experimental hypothesis testing research paradigms, can quickly complicate things. While the skills and concepts learned in the classroom are put to use in the professional practice of traffic engineering, for example, students are not necessarily learning in ways that allow them to make an immediate connection between what they are doing in the classroom or in their research and its impact on the community. Moreover, publication venues for engaged scholarship are often limited to those journals focused on pedagogy, rather than research findings.

Departmental Culture

Departments can be instrumental in supporting or discouraging engaged scholarship. They set the tenure and promotion guidelines immediately applicable to faculty members, set curriculum priorities, and can be gatekeepers of faculty-community relationships. For example, my home department trains undergraduate and graduate students, and we emphasize a scholarship of application and knowledge- building. We have an active community advisory board that assists with intern placement and consults on programmatic changes. As faculty, we are encouraged to include service learning in the courses we teach and to do research that is interdisciplinary and collaborative in nature. Co-authored publications are weighted equally with single-authored publications, and although a variety of types of products and forms of peer review “count” for tenure and promotion, peer-reviewed journals and white papers are privileged over technical reports done for community groups. Thus, while the work of faculty collaborating with community partners might be informally tracked for their potential impact on departmental relationships, work products may not be recognized or legitimized in the same ways. In contrast, in departments such as architecture and city and regional planning, where reports and renderings are viewed as examples of serious scholarship, faculty are already empowered to devote considerable amounts of time working on plans, models, and drawings that will be primarily used by community partners. Indeed, their use often legitimizes the faculty member’s work and attests to his/her professional contribution.

Despite support for engaged scholarship, tensions can still occur at the department level around interdisciplinary projects that engage student and faculty efforts on an on-going basis. Departments may have preexisting relationships with community organizations, funders, government offices, and representatives. These existing relationships can provide a pathway into collaborative research, and they can also

become barriers if engaged scholarship leads to critique of these entities. Likewise, faculty participation in interdisciplinary projects can generate concerns among administrators about recognition for their respective academic unit. And, in times of scarce resources, departmental leaders can become territorial of their faculty, particularly if they are accustomed to intra-departmental, time-limited projects.

Institutional Supports

At the institutional level, building relationships with students and community members requires that we reconfigure the power-knowledge dynamics of traditional pedagogy and academic pursuits. Experts, novices, objects of study, and hypothetical circumstances are reformulated into intellectual collaborators, co-producers of knowledge, and collective problem solvers. While these shifts in how we do research and teach may penetrate the walls of the ivory tower in ways that help create the conditions that support social change, they are often not enough to address the kinds of challenges we face in our local communities. To take that additional step in the move from the high ground of traditional research to engagement and on to social justice-focused scholarship demands a range of internal supports which permeate the multiple levels of life at the university.

Embracing engaged scholarship and service learning as staples of the teaching and curricular environment requires that internal supports be in place for both experienced and emerging engaged scholars. For example, for faculty working on interdisciplinary issues, flexibility in scheduling, which would allow classes across departments to meet together, is key to active cross-disciplinary exchange. Likewise, as faculty members' community engagement evolves, so does their engaged scholarship and teaching. Thus, it is imperative that college and departmental units recognize the time and effort that service learning requires of faculty and have mechanisms in place to enable faculty to easily develop courses based on new service learning opportunities.

Those faculty who might be characterized as potential or emerging engaged scholars will likely need more than pedagogical or curricular supports. Universities can build the capacity of their faculty to become engaged scholars by creating on-the-job training opportunities for early career scholars through an engaged scholarship mentor program. Colleagues with experience in engaged scholarship and service learning could be paired and work closely with emerging engaged scholars to help them think strategically and creatively about how their research, teaching, and outreach comes together and to incorporate best practices in each of those domains. Additionally, institutionally-sponsored training in community organizing, experiential learning, and popular education that is open to faculty, students, and community partners has the potential to strengthen participants' knowledge of and commitment to both engaged scholarship and to each other.

Developing knowledge and experience in community-university relationship building is only one hurdle for attracting early career faculty into engagement. Tenure and promotion guidelines and expectations can be another. Thus, it is important that

departments and colleges regularly review faculty assessment criteria to ensure they are flexible enough to encompass engaged scholarship activities and products without giving up a rigorous view of research and its outputs. In particular, guidelines must recognize that engaged scholarship produces a wide range of products and address how the diverse avenues and spaces for the dissemination of information, findings, and data will be assessed. Moreover, there must be parity between departmental perspectives on engaged scholarship and the tenure and promotion guidelines of the college or school the department is in and the university as a whole.

Finally, if we are serious about institutionalizing engaged scholarship and making it a norm on our campuses, then expectation is key. Making experiences and/or willingness to give engaged scholarship a shot has to be part of job descriptions and hiring assessments for both faculty and administrators. In doing so, faculty come to recognize it as a responsibility of the institution to the community and embed it in their research and teaching agendas. Likewise, exposing students to service learning throughout their academic careers effectively normalizes engaged scholarship at the institutional level. Students, not only come to expect civic engagement in their coursework, but also to expect the university to sustain the kinds of community-university relationships that encourage transformation in both the academy and the community.

Conclusion

As anchor institutions, universities have risen to the first level of the scholarship of engagement described by Boyer—as sites for bringing together human, social, cultural, and physical resources of the university to address entrenched social problems (Boyer 1996, 19). Standing at the crossroads, faced with budget reductions, growing demands for university expertise, and a limited pool of engaged scholars, we have an opportunity to do something extraordinary. We can choose to rise to the challenges that we face by taking a step into the largely untested and muddy waters of advocacy and social justice-centered engagement. This next step takes more than the practicalities outlined above. It demands that universities, as key community institutions, remain aware of our privileged position and keep the goal of equity front and center in our community-university partnerships. It also requires that we critically reflect on our pedagogical, intellectual, and institutional practices of engagement both in terms of what we're doing and how we're doing it.

Pedagogically, advocacy and social justice-centered engaged scholarship requires a shift from thinking about social change only as a possible outcome of the application of service learning and engagement to thinking about social change as a vehicle for teaching, learning, and research. Intellectually, it challenges scholars to think and act more democratically in their relationships with community partners. We must ask ourselves how we can create safe spaces for local experts, experiential learning, and on-the-fly production of knowledge. And, we must accept another risky proposition—such insights might lead to challenging the very theorists and paradigms we are using in the classroom and in our research.

As institutions, we have to consider how universities can encourage partnerships that foster democracy, citizen participation, and student engagement in ways that will support the recruitment, retention, and diversity of students and faculty, and cultivate university and city pride. On this front, universities must lead by example. As universities choose their institutional partners and make decisions that impact the learning communities and local communities around them, like where to build new stadiums or what look and feel a new building on campus will have or what environmentally friendly strategies they will adopt, it is imperative to ask: Who is represented at the decision-making table? Whose needs are being addressed? Who has the most to lose in the situation? Are the decisions the university is making in the best interest of the public good? Are they in some way addressing, creating, or worsening a disparity? Is there a way to create a more equitable outcome?

These are not easy questions to answer at any time, but they are particularly difficult in the current economic climate and in contexts where community-university engagement has meant that powerful philanthropic and public entities are financially invested in the university. These dynamics cannot only tie the hands of the university in their decision-making, but can create a ripple effect with implications for faculty whose engaged research or service learning opportunities encourage critique of public systems, policies, or services. Yet aligning engagement with other key institutional aspirations like recruitment and retention of students and faculty, diversity on campus, or curriculum that provides students with exposure and real-world skill-building can shield both individual faculty and the university from potential conflict. Moreover, it does not necessarily require additional funds, only the reallocation of resources currently being spent elsewhere. As we stand at the crossroads, these are important choices.

The issues are bigger, more complex, and more challenging than any one person, organization, or institution alone can hope to transform. If universities understand themselves as “cosmopolitan civic institutions not only *in* but *of* their local communities, as Benson and Harkavy (2000, 48) suggest, then such challenges are not simply “out there,” “off campus,” and happening somewhere else. Rather, they are right here, in the lives of the students, faculty, and staff at our institutions. Thus, it is in the best interest of both universities *and* the public to bridge the coalition of bright minds on our campuses with community stakeholders. After all, the material and social lives of both are inextricably linked and intimately shaped by these challenges. In my experience, social justice-centered engaged scholarship provides an avenue for developing civic-minded students, producing and applying knowledge, raising public awareness of the university, and making meaningful and sustainable change in our communities. In short, it is in all of our best interests to embrace this final frontier. Doing so allows higher education, as Ernest Lynton suggested, to be the best version of itself and find a higher purpose.

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