

The Possibilities and Limits of Institutionalizing Community Engagement: Reflections of an Exiled Practitioner-Activist

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Abstract

This article examines the possibilities and limits of institutionalizing community engagement in higher education through an eight-year case study of the Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement (PSE) at the University of California, Davis (2017–2025). Drawing from practitioner-activist experience, social movement theory, systems thinking, and collective impact frameworks, the article analyzes how PSE sought to build institutional capacity, shift campus culture, and advance epistemic equity. Despite significant accomplishments—including new programs, merit and promotion guidelines, and a UC-wide engagement network—the office was ultimately dismantled amid shifting institutional priorities, neoliberal pressures, and political volatility. Using radical critiques of the university, including Harney and Moten’s *Undercommons* and K. Wang Yang’s *Third University*, the article interrogates the structural constraints that limit institutionalization and explores alternative approaches to community engagement that emphasize pluralism, solidarity, and insurgent forms of organizing. The UC Davis case illustrates both the transformative potential and inherent fragility of institutionalized engagement efforts, offering insights for practitioner-activists navigating a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Keywords: community engagement, epistemic equity, higher education governance, institutionalization, neoliberal university, practitioner-activism, public scholarship, undercommons

Introduction

This article draws on my experience as a faculty administrator who helped create and implement, and ultimately witnessed the dismantling, of a cabinet-level community engagement office at the University of California, Davis over the brief span of eight years (2017–2025). My involvement began in 2017 with a service appointment as faculty advisor to the provost, who tasked me with facilitating an implementation planning process to build institutional capacity for community engagement. In 2018, I was appointed founding director of the Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement (PSE), housed within the Office of the Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor. With the launch of *Public Scholarship for the Public Good: An Implementation Framework for UC Davis* in 2019, my role was elevated to inaugural Vice Provost of Public Scholarship. Shortly thereafter, a new provost was appointed, and I reported to this leader until the office closed on June 30, 2025.

The UC Davis case offers a cautionary and diagnostic account of institutional transformation at a major public university during a precarious period in higher education. Over eight years of university community organizing, including the formation of PSE, significant progress was made in faculty and student development programs, public impact and community partner compensation grants, merit and promotion guidelines, recognition awards, and services connecting community partners with university resources. Yet these achievements fell short of the long-term goal of institutional transformation. Executive turnover, shifting institutional priorities, structural deficits, internal competition, and a looming existential crisis in higher education were major contributors to the office’s demise. Lacking sufficient institutional power, PSE was unable to fully integrate into the university’s bureaucratic apparatus, even as a university-wide office led by a chief engagement officer.

The UC Davis experience underscores both the possibilities and limits of institutionalizing community engagement. There are no universal solutions to the structural conditions shaping universities; instead, context-specific strategies and tactics can build momentum and sustain hope—though survival alone is not a long-term strategy. I argue that the dominant model of institutionalization in the form of centralized offices and cabinet-level positions is insufficient and often complicit in reinforcing existing power structures and inequities. This raises several questions: Is it possible to work within “actually existing” institutions to advance the field? What imaginative possibilities exist under institutional conditions not of our choosing? And how might practitioner-activists organize their work in more liberatory ways?

Institutional Context

UC Davis is frequently ranked among the top ten public universities in the United States and presents itself as a premier land-grant institution committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion

(DEI). Yet beneath this reputation lies a highly racialized environment in which leadership and faculty remain overwhelmingly White. As a racialized organization (Ray, 2019), UC Davis exhibits persistent tensions regarding the limited agency of faculty of color and the unequal distribution of resources favoring predominantly Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) fields. Despite modest gains in diversifying the professoriate, as of 2024, only 10% of faculty identified as Hispanic/Latinx and approximately 3% as Black/African American. These figures contrast sharply with a student population that is 72% Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and a state population that is approximately 40% Hispanic/Latinx and 6% Black/African American.

My decision to take on a leadership role in 2017 stemmed from the belief that institutional reforms could strengthen community relationships and redistribute resources more equitably. A central goal shared by publicly engaged scholars at UC Davis was the full recognition of community engagement in merit and promotion processes. Consistent with national trends, many engaged scholars at UC Davis are women and people of color who integrate community engagement into their research and teaching. Achieving recognition for this work required a broad, inclusive, and participatory organizing strategy capable of shifting norms within a predominantly White STEMM culture.

Between 2017 and 2025, I built a team that included an associate vice provost, seven staff members, and several postdoctoral scholars and graduate student researchers responsible for developing, implementing, and evaluating PSE's programs and initiatives. Our accomplishments were built on earlier faculty-led efforts to advocate for the institutionalization of community engagement. Over seven years, PSE launched nationally recognized programs, introduced merit and promotion guidelines for public and global impact, fostered a community of public scholars across two campuses and ten colleges and schools, and co-led the creation of the University of California Community Engagement Network, a coalition representing all ten UC campuses.

Theory, Practice, Praxis: Practitioner-Activist Influences and Orientations

Practitioner-activists draw on theory in multiple ways: to interpret their work retrospectively, to intentionally guide initiatives, and to engage in iterative cycles of theory-informed practice and practice-informed theory. Practice can challenge assumptions, refine theoretical frameworks, and generate new concepts that shape future action. This parallels the term “scholar-administrator” that describes individuals who occupy a “third space” between academic and administrative roles (Whitchurch, 2013; 2026), as a “critical agent of practice through inquiry and reflection” (Green, 2023, p. 8), and as an institutional change agent (Janke, 2019).

My own practitioner-activist orientation is grounded in an ethico-political responsibility for justice (Young, 2013) and shaped by professional and academic training as an architect,

geographer, and planner. Early work as a community organizer involved building multiracial and multiethnic coalitions through community-driven placemaking and community-engaged design (Hou & Rios, 2003; Rios, 2008). I have long understood my practice as boundary work between institutions and communities, aimed at sharing knowledge and achieving mutually beneficial goals through collective action (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

As an educator in professional disciplines, I have drawn on participatory planning and design methods informed by Deweyan experiential learning, Schönian reflective practice, and Freirean praxis oriented toward social liberation. Dewey emphasized learning through real-world problem solving that benefits society and cultivates future intelligent action (1916; 1938). Schön (1983) highlighted reflection-in-action as a means of navigating complexity and uncertainty. Freire (1973; 1983) centered reflection as a catalyst for consciousness and action against oppression.

As a community engagement scholar, I have also been influenced by theories of collective action, community development, systems theory, and social ecological approaches. Social movement theory emphasizes cultural framing, political opportunities, and mobilizing structures (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996). Community development approaches foreground community assets (Emery & Flora, 2006; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), grassroots organizing (Alinsky, 1989), empowerment planning (Friedmann, 1987; 1992; Healey, 1997), and environmental design (Hester, 2006; Sanoff, 2000). The interdisciplinary field of social ecology, pioneered by Murray Bookchin, conceptualizes individuals as embedded in interdependent social contexts—relationships, institutions, communities, and policies (McLeroy et al., 1988; Sallis et al., 2008)—and offers strategies for behavioral change across multiple levels (Alcalay & Bell, 2000; Golden & Earp, 2012; Thering & Chanse, 2011).

As a faculty administrator, I was drawn to collective impact as a systems approach to institutional transformation. Although originally developed outside higher education, collective impact has increasingly been applied to campus–community partnerships, community-based research, and community engagement (Lane, 2015; Schindler et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017; Orphan et al., 2018; Fox et al., 2023). Its core tenets include a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a centralized “backbone” organization (Kania & Kramer, 2012). While collective impact is typically used to structure externally focused engagement, I adapted it as an internally focused scaffold for building institutional capacity at UC Davis. Key to capacity building is innovation and learning, as institutionalizing community engagement is not a technical problem to be fixed but an adaptive challenge. Addressing it requires diverse actors to co-create solutions in response to existing cultural norms, practices, and behaviors (Heifetz et al., 2004).

These complementary theories informed coalition-building efforts across two campuses—one urban, one suburban—spanning ten colleges and schools and disciplines ranging from arts,

design, and the humanities, to social sciences and STEMM fields. A strategic decision was adopting the term “public scholarship,” broader than “community engagement,” which is often associated with “service.” A public scholarship framing signaled to faculty engaged in policy research, public science, and related work that their activities aligned with PSE’s initiatives and programs.

Organizing for Change: From Planning to Implementation

This section reflects on how the PSE team began building institutional capacity for community engagement guided by a long-term and systematic goal of institutional transformation in how administrators, faculty, and staff conceptualize and enact teaching, research, and service (Eckel et al., 1998). Envisioned through the university wide implementation framework developed by my office, the aim was to create a “culture of engagement” where: 1) public engagement in research, teaching, and service would be rewarded and recognized, 2) the collective capacity of scholarly excellence would be built, and 3) the university’s impact and visibility would have local, regional, statewide, and global reach through mutually-beneficial partnerships. In the following, I briefly illustrate how the theories and approaches described in the previous section informed strategies such as developing a common vision and agenda, designing evidence-based programming and shared measurements, aligning with university goals, crafting inclusive narratives to build awareness and support, and establishing PSE as a community engagement backbone to coordinate activities. Central to our early success was a collaborative approach that scaled actions across colleges and schools, engaged multiple levels of university activity, and built an inter-campus coalition across the University of California (UC) system.

Windows of Opportunity: Institutional Conditions for Change

At UC Davis, the institutionalization of community engagement emerged from a sequence of crises, leadership transitions, and external validations that together created favorable conditions for mobilization (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 2011).

A key opening followed the widely publicized 2011 pepper-spraying of student protesters, which prompted campus-wide questioning of the university’s public mission. Administrative responses such as *The Provost’s Forum on the Public University and the Social Good* functioned as both reputational repair and agenda-setting, temporarily elevating discourse about public responsibility and engagement. Importantly, this moment did not itself produce structural change; rather, it enabled faculty-led organizing, most notably the formation of Communities and Scholars Engaged (CASE), which articulated institutional gaps and proposed concrete reforms.

UC Davis’s Carnegie Community Engagement Classification in 2015, and its selection to host *Imagining America* in 2017, further strengthened claims that engagement constituted an

institutional asset rather than an ancillary activity. These recognitions provided external legitimacy that advocates leveraged to argue for permanent infrastructure. The arrival of a new chancellor amplified this opportunity, as a university-wide strategic planning process created formal entry points for embedding engagement-related goals. Language emphasizing “reinventing the land-grant mission” and “elevating excellence through engaged scholarship” institutionalized these priorities, even as later administrative restructurings altered the organizational landscape.

By 2019, these openings culminated in the launch of a university-wide implementation framework, accompanied by recurring financial investments and the establishment of a centralized engagement office. From an evaluative standpoint, this trajectory underscored the importance of timing and alignment: neither grassroots advocacy nor top-down planning alone would likely have produced comparable outcomes absent favorable political opportunities.

A two-year planning process shaped UC Davis’s implementation framework through four phases:

- **Listening:** Campuswide data collection through surveys, 50+ interviews, meetings with partners, and six focus groups with over 100 representatives from 60 regional organizations.
- **Sharing:** Facilitation of seven workshops with 100+ faculty, staff, students, and community partners to refine goals, leading to 26 focus groups that generated proposed activities and programs.
- **Aligning:** Socialized synthesized results with leadership across colleges, schools, and university-wide units to ensure alignment with institutional priorities.
- **Collaborating:** Initiation of high impact activities and partnerships documented in the July 2019 *Public Scholarship for the Public Good: An Implementation Framework for UC Davis*.

FIGURE 1. Four phases of implementation planning.

Framing Engagement: Diagnosing Barriers and Advancing Solutions

Consistent with framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000), the planning process treated institutional change as an organizing challenge requiring shared problem definitions and co-generated credible solutions (see Figure 1). Data collection during an extended listening phase revealed convergent barriers across diverse constituents. Faculty identified the intensive relational labor of engaged work and its marginal valuation in merit and promotion systems.

Community partners, by contrast, emphasized access barriers, bureaucratic opacity, and uneven institutional commitment as conditions that undermined trust.

The resulting prognostic frames emphasized alignment rather than differentiation: engagement was positioned as compatible with, and supportive of, existing research and teaching priorities. Proposed strategies focused on revising faculty advancement policies, coordinating community-engaged learning, and improving communication channels with community partners. From a critical perspective, this incrementalism was both strategic and limiting. While it lowered the threshold for participation, it also constrained attention to deeper epistemic hierarchies, privileging traditional scholarly outputs.

Motivational framing occurred through alignment with unit-level priorities. Rather than mandating participation, proposed goals were mapped onto existing strategic commitments and co-developed “impact activities” with interested units. This approach redistributed ownership and reduced resistance but also produced variability in uptake and depth of engagement across the institution.

Drawing on Saltmarsh’s work on institutionalizing community engagement (2016), PSE was conceived as a backbone unit to:

“plan, manage, and support community engagement initiatives through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the community engagement to function smoothly and to have the greatest impact.”

In the implementation framework, PSE’s purpose was organized around four core functions:

- Communicate the value and impact of public scholarship and learning
- Convene partners and networks
- Collaborate on programs, training, and events
- Champion policies and resources that advance publicly engaged research, teaching, and learning

FIGURE 2. PSE’s community engagement backbone four C’s.

Mobilization and Capacity Building Under Constraint

Implementation relied heavily on resource mobilization through collaboration (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Given limited staffing and political sensitivities, PSE functioned less as a programmatic hub than as a coordinating backbone. The implementation framework served as an organizing device—a flexible repertoire of actions that units could adapt to local contexts.

Adopting a collective impact approach (Kania & Kramer, 2012), the office prioritized four functions: communication, convening, collaboration, and advocacy (see Figure 2). Early activities—including engagement storytelling, communities of practice, graduate fellowships, and a focus on faculty advancement guidelines—produced visible outputs that enhanced legitimacy. Evaluatively, these early wins were critical for trust-building, though they also required ongoing negotiation with larger, more powerful units. Serving as a cross-functional backbone unit created legibility challenges in an institutional environment that resourced programs contained within individual units—conditions that would eventually factor into PSE’s closure.

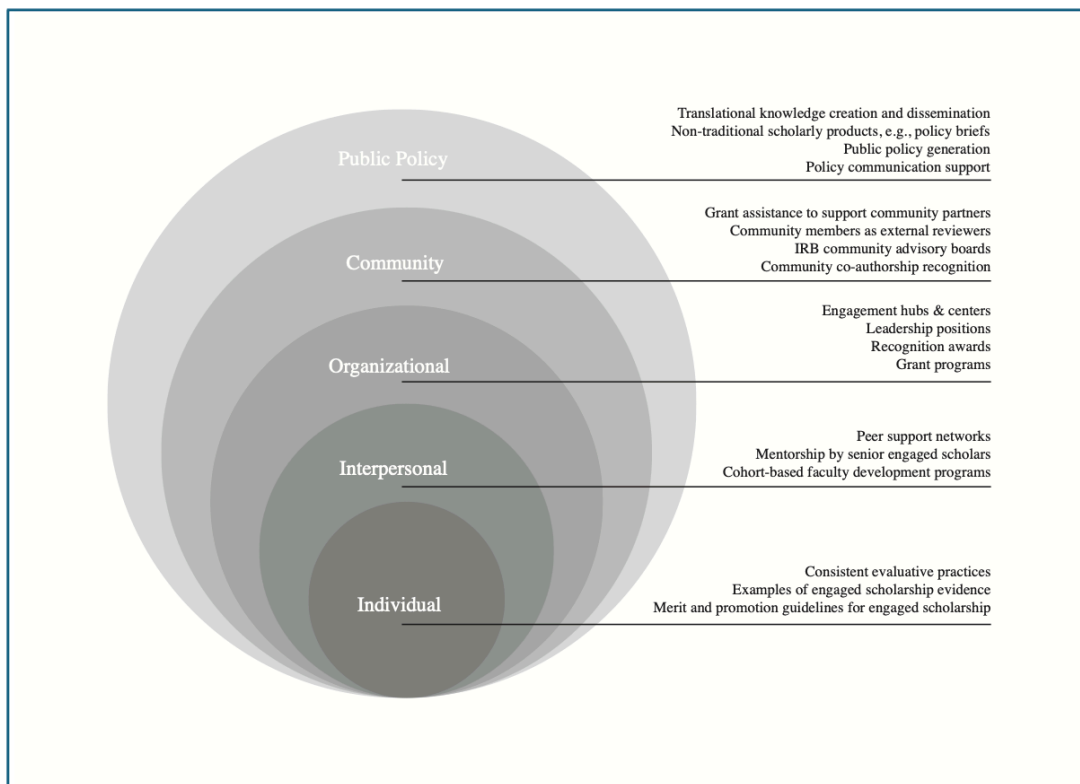


FIGURE 3. Multi-level support strategies (Rios & Saco, 2025).

Scaling Engagement Within and Beyond the Institution

Finally, a socioecological approach (Sallis et al., 2008; Stokols, 2018) informed multilevel intervention strategies spanning individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal domains. This approach facilitated coherence across otherwise fragmented initiatives, while acknowledging that institutional transformation requires interventions at multiple scales (see Figure 3).

Beyond UC Davis, the decision to extend organizing efforts to the UC system illustrates a strategic use of scale to increase PSE's visibility and influence (see Figure 4). By catalyzing a multi-campus network, institutional precarity was mitigated while amplifying influence. This "jumping scale" strategy (Miller, 2000) functioned not only as capacity expansion but also as institutional insurance within UC Davis's volatile organizational environment.

The UC Community Engagement Network (UCCEN) was formed in 2020 as a self-organized, systemwide coalition of community engagement leaders from all ten UC campuses. Its goals are to strengthen collective capacity, coordinate communication, share best practices, and advance policies that support public scholarship.

Governed by a council with representatives from each campus, UCCEN facilitated inter-campus discussions on new merit and promotion guidelines recognizing public scholarship at four campuses, informed community engagement requirements for a \$80 million state climate action program, and secured funding to develop online community engagement teaching modules for use across the UC system.

FIGURE 4. The UC community engagement network (UCCEN).

Institutional Power and Its Contradictions: Lessons Learned

Between 2019 and 2025, beginning with the launch of the implementation framework, significant progress was made toward institutionalizing engagement (see Figure 5). Eight years had passed since I first served as faculty advisor to the provost, later becoming founding director of the office, then vice provost, and ultimately leading a dedicated team that launched a suite of programs and initiatives. PSE's accomplishments served as a compelling proof of concept originally envisioned by faculty advocates dating back to 2013. This was affirmed by a successful external review in October 2022 and my reappointment as vice provost in July 2024. Yet early warning signs emerged about the tenuous nature of PSE's long-term prospects, particularly after changes in executive leadership and a noticeable shift toward neoliberal incentive structures such as *return on investment* and *self-supporting programs*.

From 2019-2025, the Office of Public Scholarship developed training and grant programs, established awards, provided community partner services, facilitated institution and systemwide collaborations, and led institutional policy reforms.

- Awarded 54 faculty–community research grants totaling nearly \$450,000
- Trained 57 public scholarship faculty fellows across nine colleges and schools, including four IARSLCE award recipients
- Supported 27 doctoral students from 16 disciplines in integrating community engagement into their research
- Placed 380+ undergraduates at 72 host sites, contributing over 115,000 community service hours
- Sponsored 39 campus and community events (\$18,000 total)
- Created a public engagement database with nearly 600 partnership and program entries
- Established an annual library research prize for graduate student public scholars
- Launched a matchmaking service connecting external organizations with faculty, resulting in 11 new collaborations
- Coordinated efforts across 20+ units to build infrastructure for public impact data collection, assessment, and communication
- Co-led a ten-campus UC coalition to strengthen systemwide community engagement
- Co-organized a community of practice for UC Davis engagement professionals
- Introduced a “Statement of Contribution to Public and Global Impact” as part of merit and promotion reviews

FIGURE 5. Accomplishments of the office of public scholarship and engagement.

Here, I share some key insights from my faculty administrator role before turning to a radical critique of community engagement’s institutionalization. This includes an attempt to institutionalize PSE’s power in an increasingly neoliberal environment rife with contradictions.

Repositioning PSE: From Capacity Building to Institutional Power

To navigate a shifting organizational environment, I sought ways to reposition PSE and weave its activities into the institutional fabric of UC Davis across successive administrations. This required expanding from a focus on institutional capacity building to an increasing focus on institutional power. Achieving this meant situating PSE within an institutional matrix of resource, symbolic, and administrative power.

As a relatively new office, PSE lacked substantial financial capital and staffing—forms of resource power that often determine influence within universities. However, this limitation had

advantages. It allowed me to assemble a team whose values aligned with the office's mission and who were committed to building something new from the ground up. This kept the team nimble and mission-focused, unencumbered by inherited programs that might dilute our purpose.

We were also intentional about cultivating a broad community of public scholars that included senate faculty, federation researchers, staff, and adjunct instructors. Programmatically, we facilitated new discussions, promoted interdisciplinary perspectives, and funded social justice-oriented research projects. These efforts helped build a racially and ethnically diverse, cross-disciplinary coalition—an essential foundation for establishing PSE's symbolic power. Still, we recognized that transforming institutional culture would require many years and over multiple administrations.

Cultivating symbolic power was essential in PSE's early years for several reasons. First, I did not envision the unit growing into a large office; its primary function was to serve as the backbone of community engagement, supporting others rather than expanding its own footprint. To survive fluctuations in budgets and shifting administrative priorities, PSE needed a strong reputation across campus and among community partners, supported by a broad interdisciplinary constituency. Second, PSE was launched one year before COVID-19 and within an institutional environment still grappling with structural deficits dating back to the 2008 financial crisis. These deficits were exacerbated by rising operational costs, unexpected state budget shortfalls, and increased personnel costs following labor negotiations in 2022. In this context, we needed a long-term strategy to build the office gradually as opportunities emerged and impacts became evident.

Toward this end, in PSE's later years, we focused on increasing our administrative power—a tactic aimed at integrating the office into the university's day-to-day operations. The 2025 Carnegie Reclassification process provided a strategic opening to highlight the importance of collective impact and the need for institutional infrastructure to support data collection, metrics, assessment, and communication of public impact. Initially, this strategy succeeded: staff capacity expanded through the addition of a program coordinator and the reinstatement of a postdoctoral scholar position that the provost had previously eliminated.

Our longer-term goal was to establish a new administrative function dedicated to coordinating public impact assessment and providing the evaluative expertise necessary to sustain it. I viewed this as essential to ensuring PSE's longevity. Where I miscalculated was in assuming that PSE's symbolic power, combined with its emerging administrative power, would be sufficient to protect it from elimination.

Neoliberal Priorities and Institutional Contradictions

During PSE's brief existence, UC Davis invested heavily in neoliberal strategies to increase external revenue. These included:

- A new vice provost-level Grand Challenges office to organize research teams pursuing large-scale federal grants
- \$347 million for tenant improvements in the first phase of a 20-acre health science innovation district
- A 15-person innovation and economic development office, led by an inaugural chief innovation and economic development officer

However, federal directives sent shockwaves across higher education, significantly affecting projected revenue for the university's expanding research infrastructure. The Grand Challenges office, opened in 2021, was sunsetted in 2026, and the projected Finance & Administrative (F&A) income intended to offset innovation district expenses fell short.

In hindsight, and given PSE's closure, it is plausible to conclude that the creation of a community engagement office was a calculated response by university executives to appease faculty during periods of administrative scrutiny; first after the pepper spray incident and later amid criticism of the university's market-driven innovation district. One could also argue that PSE was inadvertently complicit in advancing a neoliberal agenda by facilitating early visioning for a "public engagement hub" at the innovation district—an idea later abandoned by the subsequent provost—while remaining neutral about the university's problematic engagement with the surrounding multiracial and multiethnic neighborhoods.

The Closure of PSE

On June 30, 2025, the Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement closed. Strategic campus organizing that focused on seizing opportunities, reframing engagement, and mobilizing actors was vital to our success, but not enough to weather a dynamically changing institutional environment (see Figure 6). There were missteps, and I take responsibility. Among these include underestimating contingent agreements when polarities surfaced competing values and priorities. For example, the provost funded additional personnel who joined my office in the fall of 2023 to support the university's 2025 Carnegie Reclassification application and to build institutional capacity for data collection, metrics, assessment, and communication of public impact. At the beginning of 2025, funding for the positions would not be continued by the provost's office, and I was asked to lay off staff. This was in the context of moving and sudden budget-reduction targets to my unit, and was indicative of the challenges I faced operating within a bureaucratic environment marked by limited transparency, weak accountability, and shifting institutional priorities that were often misaligned with building a culture of engagement. I was not naïve about these challenges as my office pursued strategies with the greatest potential impact while

accounting for changing priorities. Yet these could not shield the office from institutional conditions beyond our control or from administrative actors who undermined our efforts.

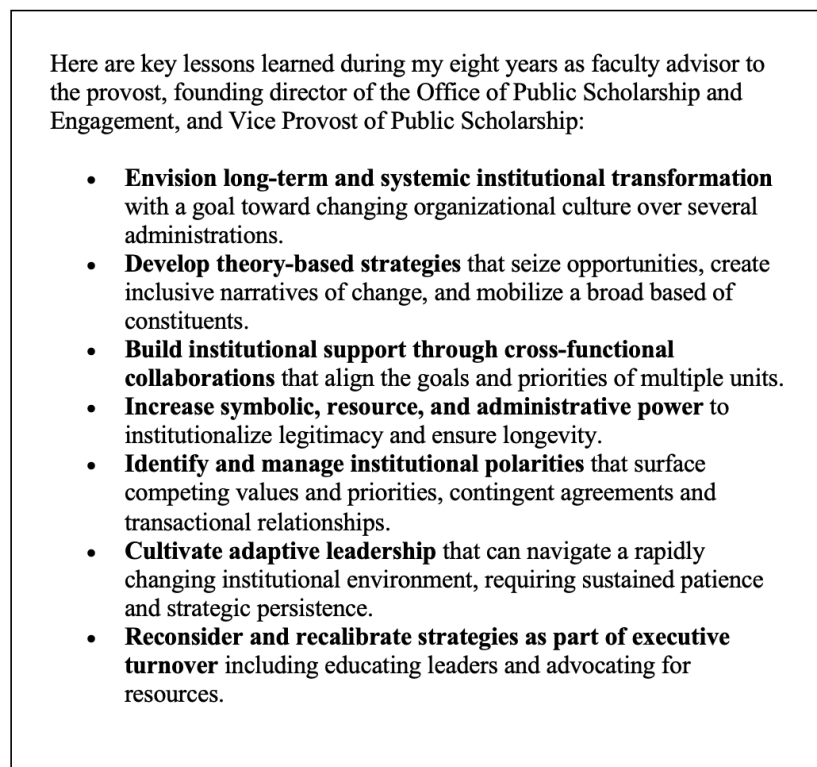


FIGURE 6. Lessons learned after eight years of institutionalization.

Many faculty and staff were shocked and upset by the announcement of PSE's closure. Some sought my advice about organizing in opposition to this decision, as did community partners serving on our advisory groups. However, I did not see a viable strategy capable of pressuring the provost or securing support from the chancellor, whose priorities centered on building a technology innovation district amid federal directives affecting universities. Weak support from the faculty senate leadership prior to the office's closure suggested they would not intervene either.

A letter signed by more than 60 faculty members was eventually sent to the chancellor and provost advocating for the continuation of PSE's programs and backbone function. The lack of response and the manner in which PSE was closed reinforced a perception among some faculty and staff that capacity-building initiatives are often eliminated as new priorities eclipse old ones. Fortunately, the closure did not significantly disrupt community partner relationships for faculty and staff who had benefited from PSE's programs.

In sum, the strategy to institutionalize community engagement through a new administrative function presented both opportunity and risk. Positioning PSE as a community engagement

backbone within a collective impact framework was initially critical to building capacity, but it proved precarious without assurances of long-term funding—particularly as the institutional context shifted. Institutional transformation is a gradual process that demands sustained patience, strategic persistence, and leadership capable of adapting to changing conditions. Universities such as UC Davis, like many large academic institutions, tend to be structurally conservative—relying on established norms, bureaucratic processes, and risk-averse decision-making. This can limit their capacity to support continuous social learning, foster innovation, and sustain creativity over extended time horizons.

Similarly, the Carnegie Reclassification process created an opportunity to expand PSE’s role from a set of individual programs to an institution-wide function and to explore a permanent role as a convener and hub for data collection, coordination, assessment, and evaluation. However, these efforts unfolded during a fragile period marked by political and economic pressures, budget shortfalls, and the arrival of a new administration with little appetite for institutionalizing community engagement and a tendency to frame impact primarily as a public relations and communications strategy that reinforced traditional research. Ultimately, the UC Davis case illustrates the limits of institutionalization when community engagement lacks institutional power. The creation of community engagement offices and the appointment of chief engagement officers often serve as symbolic gestures, responsive to particular moments rather than durable commitments.

Epilogue: A Radical Critique of Institutionalization

“The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us... I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly.” —Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*

“Universities are machines made up of many smaller machines—none of which are perfectly loyal to colonialism... The scyborg reorganizes institutional machinery; it subverts, rewires, and redirects it to its own intentions.” —K. Wang Yang, *A Third University Is Possible*

Institutionalizing community engagement within research universities remains a profoundly complex undertaking. The experience of UC Davis illustrates the difficulty of embedding equity-oriented, public-facing work within institutional environments increasingly shaped by market logics, political intervention, and fiscal austerity. In my final years as a faculty administrator, institutional priorities shifted markedly toward revenue generation and financial return on investment, with econometric measures applied unevenly across programs. Units that did not generate revenue, attract donors, or align with executive priorities were disadvantaged in ways emblematic of the neoliberal university (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000).

These pressures were intensified by a politicized climate in which elected officials threaten to withhold funding unless universities implemented ideologically driven reforms. Legislative interventions in curriculum, faculty labor, and research funding correspond with emerging analyses of the “postliberal university,” a context in which partisan demands reshape the contours of academic governance (Taylor & Cantwell, 2024). Under such conditions, the future of community engagement—particularly in contexts involving historically marginalized communities—remains uncertain. The nationwide retrenchment of DEI efforts underscores this vulnerability.

At the same time, national organizations and foundations have called for structural reforms to enhance institutional support for engaged scholarship and public impact (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2025a; 2025b). While these collective efforts signal a growing recognition of the value of engagement, they provide limited guidance for navigating entrenched structural barriers or addressing the field’s chronic legitimacy problem in research-intensive settings. The UC Davis case offers a vantage point from which to examine both possibilities and limits of institutionalization.

This raises fundamental questions: Can community engagement advance meaningfully within “actually existing” universities? What alternative possibilities emerge under institutional conditions not designed to support epistemic justice? And how might scholars and practitioners organize their work in more liberatory ways?

To address these questions, radical critiques of the university provide critical analytical tools. Fred Moten’s and Stephano Harney’s theorization of the undercommons (2004; 2013) and K. Wang Yang’s (a.k.a. la paperson) concept of a third university (2017) offer frameworks that illuminate both the structural constraints and the creative capacities of actors embedded within higher education.

The undercommons refers to the informal networks, fugitive practices, and unsanctioned forms of *study* cultivated by individuals who perceive themselves as outside or in opposition to institutional structures. Its denizens resist university professionalization and control, and engage in *fugitive planning*—collective experiments in social life and knowledge production that operate at the margins of institutional visibility.

In contrast, a third university is a decolonial framework that conceptualizes universities as assemblages of interlocking “machines,” each susceptible to subversion. Yang’s *scyborg* metaphor describes actors who repurpose institutional machinery to resist the logics of settler colonialism and the nation-state. While grounded in distinct intellectual traditions—Black radical thought and decolonial/Indigenous critique—both frameworks highlight possibilities for transformative practice that exceed the limits of formal institutionalization.

Applying these frameworks to community engagement reveals tensions between the field’s normative commitments and the institutional logics that shape its implementation (see Figure 7). While community engagement emphasizes equity, reciprocity, and relational knowledge production (Tuck, 2009), institutionalization often reinscribes the very hierarchies and exclusions that radical critiques seek to dismantle. In the current period of heightened political scrutiny, administrative restructuring, and budget contraction, the risks of assimilation into dominant institutional frameworks are increasingly apparent.

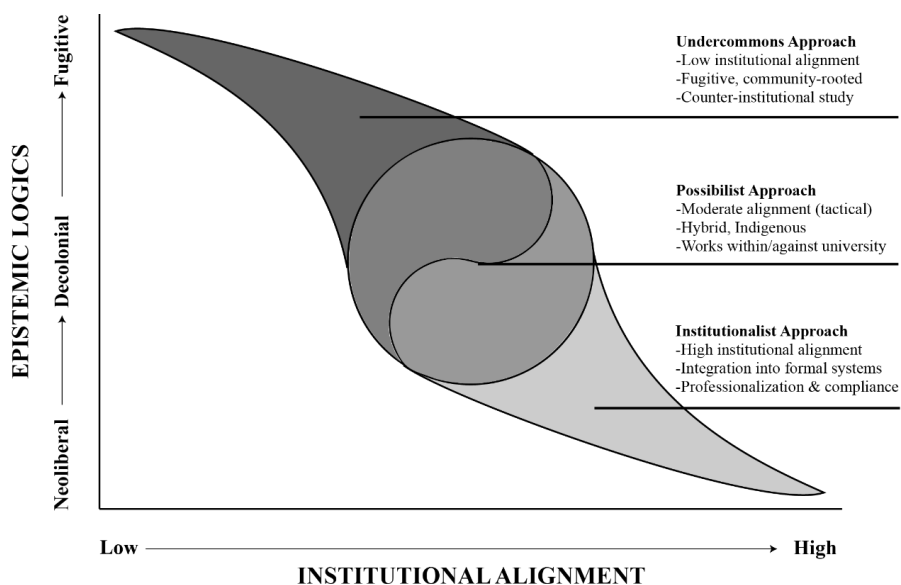


FIGURE 7. Typology of community engagement approaches in higher education.

Acknowledging the field’s ontological and epistemological diversity opens conceptual space for more plural approaches to community engagement. Three broad orientations—each aligned with different theories of resistance and/or change—are instructive:

1. The institutionalist approach seeks formal integration into university structures.
2. The possibilist approach, which tactically navigates institutions while advancing longer-term transformations rooted in Indigenous and decolonial epistemologies.
3. The undercommons approach cultivates fugitive, counter-institutional forms of organizing and knowledge production.

These orientations are not mutually exclusive over the course of time. Nor do radical approaches necessarily require abandoning institutional engagement. Rather, their simultaneity invites practitioners to recognize alternative formations that do not conform neatly to organizational charts or rely solely on institutional legitimacy. At the same time, it is essential to avoid romanticizing radicality or underestimating the contradictions faced by scholars attempting to enact such approaches (Gonzalez Stokas, 2022; Hale, 2008; Patel, 2021).

The UC Davis experience illustrates the iterative and often nonlinear character of these approaches. Early phases of campus organizing, strategic planning, and program development

reflected a possibilist orientation. Later attempts to institutionalize PSE as a university-wide backbone unit were unsuccessful, and the office was ultimately shuttered amid budget reductions and a shift toward revenue-seeking units focused on innovation, technology, workforce development, and economic impact. In the aftermath, publicly engaged scholars began organizing independently of formal structures. A visioning workshop held in spring 2025 revealed strong interest in sustaining PSE-like programming and exploring insurgent modes of organizing aligned with a “public scholars undercommons.” However, it is too early to tell if there is enough energy, motivation, and interest to organize in a manner “to be in, but not of” the university (Moten & Harney, 2004).

A Call to Action: Toward Pluralism in Community Engagement

Oppositional and possibilist approaches represent reasonable responses to the limits of contemporary higher education—a system in which community engagement is deeply entangled. Reflecting across my experiences as a community organizer, participatory designer, engagement scholar, practitioner, and faculty administrator, I contend that the field must pause, reflect, and recalibrate.

Drawing on *The Undercommons* and *A Third University Is Possible*, I encourage practitioner-activists to experiment with approaches that challenge dominant institutional norms. These strategies are not definitive solutions but provisional responses within a higher education system that moves through cycles of growth, conservation, collapse, and reorganization (Gunderson & Holling, 2002). Shifting leadership, political pressures, and structural instability continually shape which approaches become feasible and how they evolve within institutional conditions.

Higher education stands at a critical juncture. Practitioner-activists must consider whether to wait for stability that may never come or to acknowledge that institutional approaches to epistemic equity remain fundamentally constrained. Pluralism offers a heuristic for navigating this crossroads: What must change? How can practitioner-activism expand? And what must the field confront if epistemic justice is to move beyond aspiration?

It is my position that incremental reforms are unlikely to be sufficient. What is required is a new prophetic narrative capable of reorienting higher education away from epistemic harm and toward justice. Small-scale experiments in community engagement can serve as laboratories for reimagining the relationship between universities and communities, positioning higher education as a public good rather than a market actor. Such transformations would require reconfiguring institutional architectures—programs, centers, budgets, and organizational priorities—around solidarist rather than market-driven values.

For practitioner-activists, tensions persist between our positionality as university labor and our ethical obligations to justice. Our individual actions are embedded within institutional processes that produce inequitable outcomes. Recognizing these conditions requires linking individual action to collective agency. Allyship can reinforce institutional reform; solidarity, in contrast, entails shared struggle that may be unsanctioned or institutionally risky.

These questions are urgent in a time of disruption. Radical critiques illuminate the fragility of community engagement when epistemic justice is the ultimate aim. Advancing a “university unbound” and deepening practitioner-activism offer potential pathways forward. At UC Davis, the institutional context continues to shift, moving from an office-based model toward early experimentation of a public scholars undercommons. Regardless of the outcome, it is time to embrace the idea that community engagement is not merely a programmatic function but a way of being.

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