The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education: Reflections and Future Directions

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*I*n her article on higher education and its relationship to efforts to solve wicked problems, Judith Ramaley *(2014)* noted that "workable responses and solutions to today's problems require new ways of learning, new ways of working together, and new definitions and measures of progress and success" *(p. 9)*. In our original article, we argued that for higher education to contribute meaningfully to transformational change in society, it would have to act to make engagement scholarship a central aspect of its work, spanning the spectrum of its disciplinary units, centers, and institutes *(Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012)*. Solving societal problems requires recognition that the problems are in society; as an embedded part of complex society systems, these societal problems affect universities and the students, alumni, faculty, and staff who are a part of both the university and community systems. Thus, we argued, efforts to solve problems-in-society require new approaches to knowledge generation, generally described within the context of partnerships, collaboration, exchange of knowledges, and cocreation of solutions. Ensuring sustainability of successes gained through the scholarship of application also requires similar collaborative processes. In effect, as Checkoway *(2015)* noted, higher education needs to view research in communities as "a process which builds community" *(p. 139)*.

Because higher education is a social institution *(Fear, 2015)*, it has an implicit responsibility to serve the public that created it and sustains it financially through tuition, government grants and contracts, corporate giving and partnerships, and public philanthropy. Indeed, public land-grant colleges and universities were founded on "ideals that recognized the need to apply knowledge-based solutions to societal challenges, requiring that researchers work with people outside academia as partners with as much to offer as to learn" *(Fitzgerald & Simon, 2012, p. 34)*. Universities in partnerships with communities can play a key role in enabling individuals to chart pathways to achieving upward mobility. This requires a reaffirmation of the centrality of engagement within the knowledge process role that universities need to play within society. There is

a changing perception within society of the role of institutions, particularly large firms, in providing individuals a path to upward mobility. The university has a role both in performing the scholarship and in conducting the activities required to enable individuals to better chart their path to upward mobility and civic engagement as citizens.

Fear *(2015)* added that universities are economic as well as social institutions. Many research universities generate annual economic impacts to their local communities/states in the billions of dollars. We drew attention to the managerial aspects of higher education, focusing on allocation of resources within the context of advancing institutional commitment to engagement scholarship. However, we did not address the increasing alignment of higher education's scholarship functions with state priorities for workforce development, economic development, international business, environmental quality, health care, transportation infrastructure, and other needs, all of which strengthen what has been referred to as the quad helix of systems change (higher education, business, civil society, and government; *Fitzgerald, Van Egeren, & Bargerstock, in press).* With increasing attention being given to the triple bottom line (social, environmental, and financial), it is important to consider how engaged universities will direct resources to create educational programs in entrepreneurship, development of social enterprise businesses, regionalization of innovation, and transdisciplinarity, a core aspect of community engagement scholarship.

Attempts to change individuals tend to focus on isolated-impact approaches *(Kania & Kramer, 2011)*, with interventions designed to change a specific skill, behavior, or context. Although some isolated-impact interventions produce individual change (e.g., *Schweinhart, 2006)*, scaling up such interventions and/or replicating them in novel contexts has proven difficult, in part because they are isolated from the broader systems in which they are embedded. McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck, and Fitzgerald *(2015)* expanded our appeal to embrace systems thinking and modeling by offering six principles of what they have called "systemic engagement." In addition to systems thinking that encompasses changes in policies and environments, systemic engagement involves collaborative inquiry, support of ongoing learning *(Fitzgerald & Zientek, 2015)*, emergent designs rather than preset fixed approaches to change, multiple strands of inquiry (paralleling multiple knowledges), and transdisciplinarity.

Implicit in this notion of systemic engagement is a shift in how the institutionalization of community engagement is conceptual-

ized. As the articles in this anniversary review issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* reveal, early discussions of institutionalizing community engagement focused on securing the components that help further embed community engagement into the institution's academic culture and fabric. As is implied in our article and other more recent articles in the journal, a more contemporary approach to community engagement institutionalization is to deemphasize community as the focus and instead emphasize higher education reform as the goal. This approach suggests that institutionalization is not about finding ways to fit community engagement into the existing higher education system; rather, it is about transforming the culture of higher education so that it embraces the epistemologies and forms of scholarship that allow community engagement to thrive *(Klentzin & Wierzbowski-Kwiatkowski, 2013)*.

We also noted that to make engagement a central aspect of mission, it must align with existing university structures and functions. For public land-grant institutions, the Timberline Manifesto *(Reed, Swanson, & Schlutt, 2015)* represents an explicit proactive effort to align an institutional structure, the Cooperative Extension Service, with the broader institutional mission. The Manifesto's seven concepts for advancing alignment are remarkably consistent with the definition and conceptual framework of the engaged university in that they advocate for engaged scholarship, integration with the university, private and public partnerships to advance the power of learning technologies, moving away from an expert service delivery mode to one that is demand-driven, creating a culture that reinforces the democratization of knowledge, integrating more fully with community partners, and advancing open and action-oriented community relationships.

Democratizing knowledge through cocreation and authentic partnerships reflects the process we employed when writing the centrality paper. Over a 2-year period, we presented ideas, concepts, and then written drafts to colleagues at national meetings and over the internet to gather perspectives from diverse academic institutions and from equally diverse faculty members and administrators in order to reflect perspectives from institutional members of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), particularly within the Council on Engagement and Outreach. What we did not do was sufficiently engage colleagues from community colleges and private institutions or members of the community at large. To make engagement central to the university requires input from the many communities that partner and

work with university faculty and academic staff (business, health, education, government, rural and urban living environments), both locally and globally. Thus, while higher education works to align internally, it also must work with external partners to align externally. Transdisciplinarity will not work without institutional support and encouragement, and authentic community partnerships will not work unless institutional policies and practices not only encourage engagement scholarship, but also include rigorous evaluative criteria as part of the reward process.

One way to engage community, and perhaps to generate greater intergenerational input, is to make more effective use of social media to build networks and organizations that are inclusive of community partners. As indicated in Table 1, since 1999, there has been considerable growth in the number of national and international networks and organizations focused on various aspects of community engagement scholarship. The number and diversity of multidisciplinary journals has increased threefold, illustrating the dramatic increase in published papers reflecting engagement scholarship. Nearly half of APLU member web pages draw attention to engagement as core to their mission, and more than half have a specific office to manage engagement activities (see Table 1). In our original article, we recognized development of new tools for delivery of information and education but otherwise devoted little attention to social media. Although this approach was appropriate 3 short years ago, we believe engagement professionals need to carefully and comprehensively assess what a "world awash in social media" means for university engagement. Does it suggest opportunities? Does it suggest threats? Most certainly, the answer to both of these questions is a resounding yes, and considerable attention is being given to such questions within the context of online learning.

Online learning itself challenges traditional approaches to knowledge generation, application, and dissemination, as well as measurement of outcomes. It also raises questions about data sources, generally referred to as big data, and how analytics may provide new dimensions for community engagement scholarship in experiential learning settings as well as student performance and success analytics, particularly in just-in-time feedback for instructors. Sonka *(2014)* brought attention to a potentially significant transformational change in how systems modeling using big data will change our conceptions of causality, when in fact big data systems are composed of relational and dynamic interactions of multiple correlated variables. Because they are correlational and

dynamic, open systems are always to one degree or another in flux; often they are best understood in terms of probability estimates, not cause-effect associations. Social science, including that applied to engagement, relies heavily on information gleaned from surveys. The increasing ability to measure transactions or proxies for actual behavior, however, is leading researchers to question the need for surveys. Are we as engagement scholars well positioned to take advantage of big data tools, techniques, and methods? Are we well positioned to assist our constituents? Are we ready to use big data and analytics to forecast human trafficking, urban crime, interstate transportation systems and supply chain logistics, continuity of education from pre-K through higher education, or the impact of social enterprises on regional and national economies? How will engagement scholarship address such questions within the context of its emphasis on multiple knowledges, cocreation of solutions, and collaborative partnerships?

Table 1. *Scanning the Environment Landscape: Where Are We Now?* Web-Based Survey of 203 APLU Member Institutions*

How many institutions…	Percent
have outreach or engagement in mission or vision statement or core goals?	46%
have the words *outreach, engagement,* or *partnerships* on their home page?	23%
have a central administrator with the title of outreach and/or engagement?	10%
have received the Carnegie Engaged University classification?	21%
have an office or center for service-learning, civic engagement, or experiential learning?	48%
have a central office of outreach, engagement, or community partnerships?	57%

Time Period	Number of Networks & Organizations	Number of Journals
1990-1999	12	13
2000-2009	36	26
2009-2015	47	39

Note. Adapted with permission from *Scanning the Engagement Landscape: University Engagement by the Numbers,* by L.A. Van Egeren, 2015. Infographic produced by Michigan State University in collaboration with the Council on Outreach and Engagement of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. Copyright 2015 by the Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

Finally, several seminal events have occurred since publication of the centrality article. One is the emergence of the Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship (ACES) and the induction of its first two sets of members. ACES offers an expanded definition of community engagement scholarship:

> Community engagement scholarship focuses on ideas and raises questions that are important to communities and educational institutions. The work is carried out in a mutually beneficial, collaborative manner. Achievements include the co-creation of significant, creative, original, and conceptually-guided engagement through globally and locally relevant activities that systematically advance practice, teaching and learning, and/or research. Community engagement scholarship is documented, publicly shared, and reviewed through various mechanisms, including: presentations, publications, professional practice, creative work, and including news and other media. *(para. 2)*

Another seminal event is the establishment of the APLU Task Force on "the New Engagement." We challenged higher education institutions to "rethink their structure, epistemology, and pedagogy; integration of teaching, research, and service missions; and reward systems" *(Fitzgerald et al., 2012, p. 10).* The task force membership collectively spans interests across nearly all facets of higher education and is composed of individuals who have thought deeply and published widely on topics and issues related to engagement scholarship. They also are well versed in the issues raised in this retrospective on centrality of engagement and its future as a mainstream component of higher education's efforts to engage with partners to tackle the complex systems or wicked problems in contemporary society.

Also important to note is the rise of the centrality of community engagement in higher education in non-U.S. contexts. As community engagement agendas are expanding in other countries, the engagement movement has become global in scope. A substantial number of research studies on community engagement are now conducted in non-U.S. institutions of higher education. Similarly, community engagement-focused journals and publications are now available in Spanish, German, Chinese, Italian, and a host of other languages. And the 2015 annual international community engagement research conference, hosted by the International

Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement, drew researchers and scholars from more than 20 diverse countries, including Australia, Ecuador, Egypt, Ireland, Hong Kong, Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Spain, Taiwan, and the West Indies, among others. Interest in developing an engagement agenda within their institutions of higher education is growing in more and more countries. In addition to ensuring the future centrality of engagement in higher education, this trend likely will lead to further development of both the common, universal aspects that undergird all engagement efforts, as well as the unique, cultural nuances that give each nation's engagement agenda its own character. This bright and exciting future for engagement is sure to provide us all with new insights and hope for the success of higher education's "new engagement."

We, as the original authors, still hold firm their commitment to the centrality of engagement in higher education. We believe that engagement scholarship is a cultural and social imperative for higher education in the 21st century. It is evident in the complexity of societal issues and their impact on both institutions of higher education and the communities in which they reside that the traditional approach to community engagement is not sufficient. In order for these issues to be addressed, society must leverage all of its existing and future knowledge to find effective solutions. Knowledge is central to the function of higher education and is developed in the community as well as on campuses in laboratories, theaters, symphony halls, faculty halls, and classrooms. Since our article was published, however, higher education has progressively become better positioned to engage in community engagement scholarship. The recognition of this work through ACES, the New Engagement Task Force, and increasing international attention will bring more visibility and deep thinking to engagement on campuses and will challenge individual institutions and existing practices. As higher education as a whole continues to articulate its commitment to resolving societal issues, making discoveries usable, and engaging private and public partners in the work, engagement will become more central to achieving those goals.

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