

Citizen Scholars

| **OPINION** | *Research universities must strive for academic engagement* | By **Richard A. Cherwitz**

Public research universities face enormous challenges in the 21st century, perhaps none more compelling than the obligation to serve society. A 2004 National Academy of Sciences report, for example, represents the latest in a series of calls for increased commitment to interdisciplinary, socially relevant research.¹

And yet service is often portrayed as a university's third function—taking a back seat to and competing with research and teaching—instead of as academic engagement, in which collaboration and partnership with the community produce solutions to society's most vexing problems. Service is, after all, the ethical imperative driving research and teaching as well as a principal product of these enterprises. Discharging this duty in an ever-changing world requires radically rethinking “service,” finding innovative ways to leverage academe's intellectual capital to transform lives for the benefit of society.

While accomplishing this will be arduous, the payoff could be enormous. Fortunately, at my own institution there is a critical mass of faculty poised to meet this challenge, viewing themselves as citizen-scholars—researchers supplying more than narrow, theoretical disciplinary knowledge. Several of these faculty—a poet, an economist, and a neurobiologist, to name but a few—along with distinguished members of the community, including a US cabinet member, a corporate executive, and two educational leaders, are contributing to a newspaper series exploring how to engender greater connections between the university and community.²

As these scholars reveal, the quest to contribute to society means confronting inflexible administrative structures, historically embedded practices, status-quo thinking, and inertia. Among the daunting challenges confronting universities aspiring to academic engagement are:

- How do scholars develop the rhetorical skills needed to incubate and sustain projects requiring fiscal and intellectual investment by stakeholders inside and outside the university—skills typically disassociated from the scholarly enterprise?

- How can faculty integrate, synthesize, and unify knowledge to permit solution of complex social, civic, and ethical problems? How do we ensure the continued proliferation of specialized knowledge, while concurrently encouraging renaissance thinking?

- How can faculty who engage in public scholarship flourish, given traditional incentive systems that not only fail to encourage public scholarship but also may actually devalue research simultaneously contributing to society?

- How can academic engagement be achieved in the face of the long-held, rigid dichotomy of basic or applied research, frequently invoked to deter faculty from venturing too far from theoretical knowledge?

- How might the entrepreneurial thinking that universities successfully deploy for technology transfer analogously be used to empower all the arts and sciences, to unleash a university-wide spirit of intellectual entrepreneurship while respecting the sanctity of the academic enterprise?

These are but a few examples. Awareness of the problem is the first step to a solution. Faculty at research institutions must begin a rigorous conversation about how to make the academy, a culture that far too often resists change, more responsive to the needs of society. It is time to reflect on what must be done to harness the vast intellectual assets of universities as a lever for social good, which is what it will take to fashion genuine synergy between the university and its community partners.



“Add-ons” such as certificate programs, internships, and professional development courses cannot solve the larger, structural problem. These are inefficient stopgap measures, competing for time and energy and ultimately failing to address the fundamental question of how knowledge is optimally organized, integrated, and put to work. One example is an Intellectual entrepreneurship seminar we offer as part of a National Science Foundation Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship program (IGERT) in cellular and molecular imaging for diagnostics and therapeutics.³ In this course students develop plans for assessing and commercializing a technology. Unlike add-ons, this and other IGERT seminars integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines with a variety of skill sets, empowering students to own their education and to utilize their expertise both for increasing disciplinary knowledge as well as promoting social change.

In another recent seminar, undergraduates in the natural sciences examined interdisciplinary knowledge pertaining to the often misunderstood concept of addiction, and wrestled with connecting this knowledge to personal and public policies.⁴ In addition to focusing on research, the course investigated the intersection of scientific and public perspectives. Two students from this seminar published op-eds on the subject.

This shows that service need not become a platform for disgruntled and gadfly faculty, something that would make it too easy for naysayers to dismiss calls for academic engagement as merely diatribes of failed researchers. Instead, service should be pursued by prominent scientists and humanists who, while understanding the distinctive mission of research institutions, also recognize the need to build connections between the university and community and who refuse to apologize for being scholars. After all, creating a culture of academic engagement requires accountability and collaborative problem-solving in forthright public exchanges about how to enact change. This cannot be accomplished by any one academic discipline or sector; it's up to the whole academy.

Richard Cherwitz (spaj737@uts.cc.utexas.edu) is professor of communication studies and founder and director of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Texas at Austin.

References

1. www.nap.edu/books/0309094356/html
2. <https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/engagement.html>
3. https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/igert_ie.html
4. https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/scholars_seminar.html