

Addressing Tenure and Promotion Challenges for Engaged Scholars

by Beth Eschenfelder, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
The University of Tampa
727-403-4110 ■ beschenfelder@ut.edu

At the Engaged Scholarship Conference, I would like to explore tenure and promotion challenges surrounding engaged communication scholarship and consider strategies for how scholars and their institutions can update policies and practices to more equitably evaluate engaged scholarship. Certainly, this topic is not new, but as a junior scholar on the tenure track, it's at the forefront of my mind. Despite the extensive workload and rigor required for engaged communication scholarship, the tremendous benefits to the community, and the rich accounts that can result from such research, engaged scholarship sometimes lacks credibility in academia, especially when a scholar is facing decisions about tenure and promotion. In addition, regardless of effort and soundness of approach, engaged scholarship often is not weighted equitably in comparison to traditional research in tenure and promotion decisions.

Many academic institutions base their tenure and promotion decisions on some combination of research, teaching and service (*Adams, 2003*). More specifically, institutions often follow guidelines proposed by Ernest Boyer (1990) in his work, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Boyer outlined four forms of scholarship: a) scholarship of discovery: the generation of knowledge through which we confront the unknown and seek understanding for its own sake; b) scholarship of integration: the serious, disciplined work that seeks to interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear on original research; c) scholarship of application: the dynamic process through which knowledge is applied to help solve individual and societal problems, going far beyond the concept of service as good citizenship; and d) scholarship of teaching: both educating and enticing future scholars; not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it.

The term “engagement” rarely shows up in Boyer’s earlier (1990) work; similarly, it seldom seems to make its way into university handbooks. Boyer may have attempted to rectify this in his later

work. Just before his death in 1995, Boyer made a presentation at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on “The Scholarship of Engagement.” In his speech (1996b), he reintroduced the four forms of scholarship, but his principal focus was on the “scholarship of engagement.” Boyer stressed the importance of faculty and universities contributing their expertise and resources to “our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems” (p. 32). Ultimately, explained Boyer (1996b) “the scholarship of engagement also means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other...enriching the quality of life for us all” (p. 33).

Despite his emphasis on the *scholarship of engagement* just before his death, and despite the mix of scholarship forms he previously identified that are listed in many faculty handbooks, scholarship of discovery remains a top-weighted factor in tenure and promotions decision (see Adams, 2003; Braxton, Luckey & Helland, 2000, 2006; DeFleur, 2007). “However scholarship is defined,” says DeFleur (2007), “it always translates to publications” (p. 111), and “numerous publications within relatively short time frames,” adds Seeger (2009, p. 16). Seeger further points out that the emphasis is on “highly selective peer reviewed journal articles” (p. 16).

Further compounding the problem, many institutions blend Boyer’s concept of “engagement” with the scholarship of application, and application is usually interpreted by academic institutions to mean “service.” But tenure and promotion committees “draw rigid lines between service and research” (Seeger, 2009, p. 16). “To be considered scholarship,” says Boyer (1990), “service activities must be tied directly to one’s special field of knowledge and relate to, and flow directly out of, this professional activity” (p. 22). This type of service, Boyer explains, “is serious, demanding work, requiring rigor—the accountability—traditionally associated with research activities” (1990, p. 22). Regardless of these facts, “at tenure and promotion time, the harsh truth is that *service* is hardly mentioned,” says Boyer (1996a), and “faculty who do spend time with so-called applied projects frequently jeopardize their careers” (p. 13).

Similarly, DeWine (2005) points out that faculty conducting forms of applied research “have been told that their research does not ‘count’ in any significant way and that they should abandon such lines of research if they want to achieve tenure” (p. 192). DeWine further explains that “when it comes

to awarding tenure most faculty and administrators at universities will accept this type of scholarship as evidence of productivity only as long as there is ‘enough’ traditional research activity as well” (p. 191-192).

“Even for faculty and administrators willing to support the significance of engaged scholarship, issues remain,” say Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008, p. 260). Barge and Shockley-Zalabak list a range of questions related to methods for evaluating engaged scholarship, outlets for engaged work, issues of assessment and accreditation, needs for faculty development to support engaged work, resources required, and other questions (p. 260). DeWine (2005) suggests that “in an environment that should welcome diversity of thought and method, a certain amount of engaged scholarship should be encouraged, if not required, to broaden our perspectives” (p. 193). Frey and Carragee (2007) concur: “If we truly want communication research to make a difference, making a difference ought to become a criterion for evaluating communication research, just as it is in judging teaching, when students essentially are asked what difference a teacher/course made” (p. 210).

There has been great headway made to enhance the credibility of engaged scholarship, but there’s more work needed in the area of tenure and promotion. Methods of evaluation should go beyond traditional measures, such as publication, to examine the community-based outcomes of the engaged scholarship effort, such as better collaboration and increased awareness of specific project outcomes (DeWine, 2005). DeWine and others also advocate for a broader definition of prestigious research that includes engaged scholarship, and some academic institutions are doing exactly that. When academic institutions periodically review tenure and promotion criteria, “engaged scholarship can become an increasing part of these documents,” suggests Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008). “Specific criteria for tenure can embrace multi-disciplinary, engaged work and curriculum transformation” (pp. 260-261). Perhaps we have reached a time when more engagement is needed in our academic home front to enact these recommendations in our institutions—a challenge that seems daunting and worthy of further exploration.

Reference List

- Adams, J. (2003). Assessing faculty performance for merit: An academic accomplishment index. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 58(3), 240-250.
- Barge, J. K. & Shockley-Zalabak, P. (2008, Aug.). Engaged scholarship and the creation of useful organizational knowledge. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 36(3), 251-265.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Boyer, E. L. (1996a). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service & Outreach*, 1(1), 11-20.
- Boyer, E. L. (1996b, April). The scholarship of engagement. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49(7), 18-33.
- Braxton, J. M., Luckey, Jr., W. & Helland, P. (2006). Ideal and actual value patterns toward domains of scholarship in three types of colleges and universities. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 129, 67-76.
- DeFleur, M. L. (2007, Jan.). Raising the question #5 what is tenure and how do I get it? *Communication Education*, 56(1), 106-112.
- DeWine, S. (2005). Contributions of engaged scholarship to the academic community. In J. L. Simpson & P. Shockley-Zalabak (Eds.), *Engaging Communication, Transforming Organizations: Scholarship of Engagement in Action* (pp. 147-169). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Frey, L. R., & Carragee, K. M. (2007). *Communication Activism Volume One: Communication for Social Change*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Seeger, M. (2009). Does communication research make a difference: Reconsidering the impact of our work. *Communication Monographs*, 76(1), 12-19.