

Celebrating Engagement as a Lived Experience  
Or  
How I Avoided a Nugatory Life

Dr. Colleen M. Keough  
Clinical Professor  
Annenberg School for Communication  
University of Southern California  
[Keough@usc.edu](mailto:Keough@usc.edu)

Self-definition, or in marketing parlance "creating your personal brand" – can be an insightful endeavor. As I reflect on my various employments over the past years, my personal brand has been as a "theoretical consultant," and "engaged scholar."

*"People Plan....and God Laughs"*  
(Poster in the Jewish Student Center, Univ. of Southern California)

In the last millennium, I pursued a traditional graduate education in organizational communication intent on obtaining a tenure-track position at a research institution. But that straight and narrow path from BA to MA to Ph.D. to Assistant Professor took some unexpected turns. My first position was as an internal consultant at the Rockwell International Space Division in Downey, California. Rockwell International builds the space shuttles. I started 3 weeks after the Challenger accident and worked for some of the people Phil mentions in his book, *Apollo, Challenger, Columbia: The Decline of the Space Program*.

As a newly minted Ph.D., I was deeply seeped in theory. My self-identity, or personal brand, was that of a "theoretically grounded consultant." Luckily, Rockwell's Management Training & Development Department had a theoretically informed curriculum and I was to carry on in that tradition. On multiple occasions, I was asked what about the academic research on a particular issue or how a research finding was derived. Rockwell International supported my involvement in academic conferences and I was encouraged to maintain my ties with the academy.

*"Fortunate are the flexible for they will not be bent out of shape."*  
(Anonymous)

Fast forward several years. I'm employed in a full-time, non-tenure track position at a major research university. The institutional context is very relevant. As several participants have commented, the value of engaged scholarship for tenure & promotion is marginalized within most academic institutions. However, as someone without the opportunity for tenure, I have greater flexibility in selecting projects that I find engaging and believe will serve my teaching and service requirements.

Thus, within this context, I define my personal brand as "engaged scholar." I feel a (moral?) obligation to be informed of the scholarly literature. And yet, I select projects that are unlikely to make it into peer-reviewed journals; hence projects that do not meet the dominate definition of "scholarship." Yes, I am comfortable with claiming the producer's position of "scholar"; without meeting conventional standards for the "product."

Two recent research projects reflect the research-practice theme: (1) "Communication Change Management Research Assessment" (co-authored with Rebecca Weintraub) for the Council of Communication Management; and (2) the "Social Justice Public Relations Inquiry", with the USC Annenberg Institute for Justice in Journalism and sponsored by the Ford Foundation. In both projects, data were gathered from practitioners, analyzed according to established social science procedures, and reports made to practitioner and academic audiences. Both projects were presented at previous Aspen conferences.

*"Looking Ahead Through My Rear View Mirror"*

My new project: Recently, I was contacted by a local dispute resolution center to meet with the Pasadena Chief of Police about some communication and conflict management issues facing the department. The incident prompting the meeting was an officer-involved shooting. From our initial discussions several overlapping issues emerged: an overall desire to improve public communication during times of crisis; how to work with traditional media as well as new media/citizen journalists; and mending/rebuilding trust with the minority community. The Chief believes these issues are common in law enforcement. As the current president of the California Police Chief Association (CPCA), he welcomed my suggestion to survey CPCA members about the challenges of communicating during crises, with a special focus on the role of new media/ICTs.

So, as with my past projects, this engagement will be theoretically informed and methodologically sound. I do not expect the outcome to be nugatory for the CPCA, but whether it rises to the level of "scholarship" is an assessment I willingly defer to a different audience.