

**Report of the ad hoc Faculty Committee on community engaged scholarship
for the Provost of the University of Pennsylvania**

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to offer a definition of community engaged scholarship at (and for) Penn. This concept gained increased currency as a result of conversations in the 1980s that sought to broaden conceptions of scholarship. The roots of the idea, of course, are far deeper. At its heart, community engaged scholarship entails connecting scholarly expertise with the expertise of community members outside the university in order to resolve issues and challenges facing that community. A central feature of this work is that it is predicated on mutually beneficial partnerships—both the university and the community partners benefit.

The report also seeks to describe how this concept aligns with Penn’s system of faculty review. Faculty work is divided into several areas: teaching, research, service and in the health professions, practice. Community engaged scholarship encompasses activities that fall into each of these areas. We define the term in the following way: **Community engaged scholarship entails working in partnership with the community in a relationship of transparency and trust in order to draw on the expertise of the partners to address a pressing real-world problem.** Thus, teaching an ABCS course (or other community-based teaching) is an expression of scholarly expertise but would be evaluated as teaching. Working with a community-based organization and providing disciplinary or field expertise in response to a community issue might be considered faculty service. Community engaged research involves working collaboratively with community partners, seeking to produce positive change, and in doing so generating new knowledge that can be shared with and evaluated by disciplinary peers.

We recognize that departments and schools have different norms about the kinds of activities and products that are valued in the context of faculty review. Our hope is that this report will help colleagues see the ways in which community engaged scholarship aligns with the aims of scholarship and the development of new knowledge. We also hope it will lead to more expansive thinking about the kinds of scholarly work we value and encourage as an institution.

Report

In January 2021, the Provost's office charged this committee with developing a definition of community engaged scholarship that could inform departmental and school discussions regarding how such work is assessed in the context of annual faculty review and tenure and promotion processes. Our work was intended to complement the earlier efforts of an ad hoc committee whose [report](#) discussed the value of Academically Based Community Service (ABCS), Penn's conception of community-based teaching and learning (or service learning) in the disciplines, and how such work might be further supported and encouraged. We are also cognizant of the resolution passed by the Senate Executive Committee in October 2020, that asked departments and schools to consider how they might credit "engaged scholarship" in faculty performance reviews. We recognize that many forms of scholarship advance the public good. However, this report focuses on community engaged scholarship.

Penn's pragmatic founding and a broader vision of societal engagement

Working to address pressing needs in our communities and our society is part of Penn's DNA. Benjamin Franklin's founding vision for Penn was an educational institution that would serve not as a finishing school for the elite but one that would prepare students to serve society and whose institutional efforts would focus on solving pressing real-world problems. This pragmatic vision continues to inform Penn's work today. Faculty engage in a wide range of scientific and empirical research across myriad disciplines and fields and much of it is aimed at addressing some of the most important issues facing our communities and humankind. One manifestation of that work is community engaged scholarship.

Defining community engaged scholarship

The term community engaged scholarship emerged in the final quarter of the twentieth century. At that time many critics argued that universities were out of touch with the needs of society—too intent on serving narrow disciplinary interests. A number of national associations began calling for a reclaiming of the civic and public purposes of higher education—improving social conditions and creating a more just and equitable world. This led to a broader conception of scholarship. In 1990, Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, wrote a highly influential book, Scholarship Reconsidered (Boyer, 1990), in which he offered such a vision. While Boyer recognized the importance of basic research, he argued for scholarship aimed at addressing pressing real-world problems in our communities, what he ultimately termed the scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1996). Boyer saw this as a powerful way to produce new knowledge as well as a means of preparing students for lives of civic and democratic involvement.

For the past thirty years, Penn has been an influential leader in the higher education civic and community engagement movement because of its emphasis on the development of mutually beneficial partnerships with members of the local community as the foundation for community engaged work. A community partner may be proximate to campus, within

the wider Philadelphia region or beyond. The partnership should be sustained and both the university (e.g. faculty, students) and the community should benefit. The concept of mutually beneficial partnering has been central to the work of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships since its inception. It is worth noting that this concept has become a key criterion for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's prestigious [community engagement classification](#). This idea of place-based and partner-focused community engagement stands in stark contrast to approaches that universities have undertaken historically, which have tended to be technocratic in orientation, perhaps best captured by the phrase "we're from the University, and we're here to help." The university sends its "experts" out to solve the community's problems. By contrast, community engaged scholarship understands that the expertise of the local community is essential for addressing any significant, complex, real-world problem. The members of the community understand the problems they face and the complex socio-cultural context that must be understood. Their voices are essential for the development of knowledge and for meaningful progress to occur.

Community engaged scholarship entails working in partnership with the community in a relationship of transparency and trust in order to draw on the expertise of the partners to address pressing real-world problems. This work requires the community to have a voice. The community is often best positioned to define the most pressing problems that need to be addressed. Much of this work has an equity focus, seeking to redress injustice or collaboratively support historically marginalized groups. A defining feature of all community engaged work is that it seeks to promote the public good. Thus, an economic development initiative working with employers and neighborhood organizations to create the possibility of new jobs is community engaged work. Partnering with a company that happens to be located in the community to enhance its profit margin is not.

Community engaged scholarship is an approach to scholarly work that encompasses all aspects of scholarly life—teaching, research, service, and clinical practice.

Excellent teaching is an act of scholarship and many Penn faculty have found that teaching [ABCS courses](#) is a means of sharing their disciplinary expertise with the community. It is also a useful strategy for developing partnerships in and with the community. ABCS courses bring together faculty, students and members of the community to tackle real-world problems by bringing together academic expertise and the expertise of the community. Partners jointly define the desired outcomes. Such pedagogical experiences help students see the relationship between theory and practice. They are effective means of conveying academic knowledge—showing how disciplinary learning illuminates the world around us. ABCS courses often involve a combination of teaching, learning and research and are a powerful way of creating new knowledge. A number of these efforts have developed into major research projects that have not only helped address a pressing real-world problem but made significant contributions to an academic discipline and to our knowledge of the world.

Community engaged research involves working collaboratively with community partners to address a problem and in doing so generating new knowledge that can be evaluated and shared within an academic discipline. The support for community engaged research has become widespread in American higher education over the past several decades. The [National Science Foundation](#) requires grant applicants to not only discuss the intellectual and disciplinary impact of proposed projects but to outline their broader impacts to society. A number of academic disciplines have called for scholarship aimed at addressing societal challenges—public sociology, public history, public psychology and public philosophy are all examples of these initiatives which are aimed at expanding the audiences for research to those outside the discipline. More generally, community engaged research is a powerful means for advancing knowledge in the disciplines and beyond. Faculty members are also involved in community engaged work that would be considered service in the context of faculty review. This might include utilizing expertise while volunteering with community-based organizations or collaborating with community members on events aimed at shedding light on important local issues.

Clinical practice, particularly in the health science schools, that engages community members as active participants in identifying, addressing, and evaluating approaches to clinical issues, is another example of community engaged scholarship. Community engaged clinical practice provides the potential to create new knowledge, innovate health care, improve health equity, and advance the health professions.

Considering community-based scholarship in faculty assessments

What we hope is clear is that while community engaged scholarship is a particular approach to pursuing new knowledge, it can be readily understood within Penn's existing framework of faculty evaluation (i.e. teaching, research, service, and clinical practice.) We recognize, of course, that norms around scholarship (the form it should take and what kinds of questions should be explored) will vary across disciplines and fields. While the University provides overall guidelines for faculty review, these must necessarily be interpreted by various disciplinary communities. It would be helpful for departments and schools to clarify for themselves what sorts of activities fall into the categories of the framework and to communicate that clearly.

Community engaged research produces products that are highly valued by academic disciplines (e.g. peer reviewed articles in top tier journals,) similar to other forms of scholarship. However, we would note that community engaged scholarship can lead to products that clearly reflect disciplinary expertise and are valuable to the community, even if they are not published. For example, a faculty member might use their disciplinary expertise to write a report that analyzes a particular challenge facing the community. Such products actually can be judged by disciplinary peers. While a department may choose to weigh such products differently than more traditional ones, we would encourage colleagues to discuss how such expressions of scholarly expertise might be valued in the context of faculty review.

A final point we would make is that building trusting productive partnerships and working in a transparent and democratic manner takes time (often far more time than traditional

research since it requires attending to the community's priorities and their timeline). As such, faculty engaged in community engaged research should be given additional consideration when weighing how long it has taken for the research to come to fruition.

Our hope is that this report spurs wide dialogue about the value of this particular approach towards scholarship, one that views the community and its voice as essential for community improvement, as well as a powerful means for advancing research teaching and learning. Such work will of course need to be evaluated in light of a variety of norms across disciplines and fields. However, it also asks us to reconsider current practice. The products of community engaged research—ones useful to the community—may in some instances be different from versions of knowledge production we have traditionally recognized in academia. Further, partnering with the community in addressing challenges may take more time to conduct than more traditional approaches. In our view, this work should not only be understood and accepted, but its contributions should be deeply valued.

We conclude by noting that we are living in an era that has made clear how fragile democracy is, both here and in other parts of the world. We have seen the inequalities in our society laid bare by the pandemic. We see the ongoing evidence of systemic racism. To us, these challenges underscore the importance of community engaged scholarship and community engaged research—work that aims to create a better and more just world in partnership with members of the local community. This work makes manifest the powerful observation of philosopher John Dewey that “democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community” (Dewey, 1954).

References

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