

The University as Community Partner: Translating Research

Author : Katy Harriger

Categories : [Capacity Building](#), [Outreach Methods](#), [Uncategorized](#)

Tagged as : [academic research](#), [civic mission of higher education](#), [Community Engagement](#), [higher education](#), [Pro Humanitate Institute](#), [School of Government](#), [town-gown relations](#), [university outreach](#), [university-community engagement](#)

Date : June 26, 2015



Several months ago [I wrote](#) about some of the opportunities and challenges that exist in university efforts to engage with the public and with public issues. Around the same time fellow blogger Shawn Colvin [wrote about](#) the importance of being able to translate academic research into what he called “results-oriented solutions.”

This post continues that conversation. I see rich opportunities for us to explore, across sectors, how to improve our communities by improving our communication with each other. I will also reflect on how we might overcome the barriers that get in the way of that communication.

I'll start with the negative and end on a more positive note. There are some significant barriers in

academia to (1) *producing* research that *will* be valuable to communities seeking to address their challenges; and (2) *disseminating* research findings that *are* valuable to communities. These are different, but related problems.

Producing Socially Useful Research

Colleges and universities vary widely, as do the various professional fields represented, so it is important not to paint with too broad of a brush. But it can be said that **many of the universities where cutting edge research is being done**, and is adequately supported in ways that allow significant breakthroughs, are also universities whose culture **epitomizes the stereotype of the “ivory tower.”** This seems especially true in the social sciences, where much of the sociopolitical research that Shawn mentions is being done.

Research expectations mean that scholars are expected to publish in the top journals of their fields, to do so frequently, and, consequently, to concentrate their efforts on research and publication. Teaching is still important, but in terms of time allocated, usually comes in second in priority, and **community engagement has a far lower priority.**

What qualifies for publication in top journals is also research written in the language of others with similar training and background, making it largely inaccessible to people outside of the specific field. The quality of the work is judged by these peers and the social utility of the findings is of little importance. The bottom line is that it is currently the case that at many higher education institutions, the incentive structure around research does not encourage consideration of whether the questions one is pursuing might have a social utility in the community.

Disseminating Useful Research Findings

So, the norms in academia for how research is explained and presented **do not favor easy dissemination to non-academic audiences**, even when the findings could be very important to communities. Again, it is a problem of the kind of training academics get and the audiences they are used to speaking to. **It is also a matter of being able to find the right venues for presenting the findings** so that community activists and government officials can actually hear about new research.

Right now the most likely way that happens is through press releases from academic institutions that may or may not be picked up by the media and then, may or may not be accurately interpreted by the media source.

Overcoming these Barriers

Shawn's [post](#) and the responses that follow it make some suggestions for how to overcome these barriers. I'd like to lift those up and add some.

There are definitely places where we see these barriers being overcome and we can use them as models of what both universities and communities can do to create meaningful research partnerships.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of centers and institutes at colleges and universities that have either a specific policy focus (rural development, for example) or a broader publically engaged purpose that seeks to involve the community in addressing social needs and issues. The UNC [School of Government](#) is probably of oldest of this lot in terms of its service to local government, but the [Urban Institute](#) at UNC Charlotte does significant policy focused research, and NC State's [Institute for Emerging Issues](#) convenes stakeholders to address issues facing the state. Many more exist with a more community service focus.

At Wake Forest, our [Pro Humanitate](#) Institute is **working to transform its traditional service mission into a more publicly engaged community partnership** that includes support for community-based research. I am optimistic that we will get there because it is headed by a scholar that Shawn mentions in his post. [Melissa Harris-Perry](#) is an academic who has the communication skills to do the translation of policy research for the public that he talks about.

What these examples show us is that **when resources are put behind the creation and translation of socially relevant research, it can be a win-win situation for universities and communities.** To reach their full potential, centers

1. **need to make sure that community voices are really at the table** when planning projects, and
2. they **need to develop the skills to translate research** from across the university for the public.

I can imagine annual meetings in communities organized around policy topics of import to that community where social scientists and law professors explain the latest research findings. The agendas for those meetings could be set by community advisory boards at the centers. In addition to finding out about new research, such meetings would also reveal what we don't know and need to find out, creating an ongoing research agenda for the scholars involved.