

## Making the Case for the New American Scholar\*

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In the 2008 presidential campaign, President-elect Barack Obama was frequently critiqued by pundits for appearing or sounding overly “professorial.” I found this perplexing as the qualities I felt that they were critiquing were among the very reasons I was so enamored of his candidacy. He seemed to be able to bring facts and data to bear on his understanding of problems and entertain conflicting ideas simultaneously. Perhaps most unusual was that he was able to bring a systematic approach to an issue, informed by experts, while NOT simultaneously devaluing local knowledge or individual contexts. Rather, he seemed able to invite in and elevate the knowledge of those closest to situations and represent both kinds of knowledge in his analysis and reflection on key issues.

This, in fact, was echoed by many of President-Elect Obama’s students interviewed for a *New York Times Magazine* article (Starr, September 21, 2008). Former students of Obama over the 12 years he taught Constitutional Law, Voting Rights, and Racism and the Law at the University of Chicago observed that President-Elect Obama impressed students by being able to see both sides of an argument, forcing students to examine their own biases and assumptions, and making decisions based on sound empirical reasons but always considering the impact of decisions on real people. Students repeatedly praised Obama for not being ideological but systematically and passionately pragmatic. In the words of Dan Johnson-Weinberger students gave him much credit for “ruthless pragmatism” (Starr, 2008).

The purpose of this essay is to make a case for the kind of skills and values our President-elect was displaying, which I see as what Rice (1996) and many before him argued for as the distinct role of the “American Scholar” in society. Obama, in fact, displays skills and values that many faculty develop within themselves and foster in others throughout their academic lives in research universities. While disciplinary expertise and its application to problems tends to be the way we construct the role of faculty in the scholarship of engagement, these broader, some would say liberal arts or intellectual virtues have a major role to play in civic work. Therefore, as we advocate for the work of American scholars in research universities, and the scholarship of engagement, we need to broaden the case we are making beyond technical expertise to include a broader role for academic professionals in American democracy.

There are in fact many “cases” made for the scholarship of engagement in research universities and in the world. In trying to help scholars in research universities prepare for tenure or promotion or have their work with communities recognized, we have tried to create frameworks to explain, legitimize, and laud this work. Such efforts, begun by Ernest Boyer (1990) and Gene Rice (1996) and continued by others (Glassick, Maeroff, & Huber, 1997; Lynton, 1995; Lynton & Driscoll, 2000; O’Meara & Rice, 2005; Sandmann, Foster-Fishman, Lloyd, Rauhe, & Rosaen, 2000), have created important roadmaps for supporting, assessing, and rewarding the scholarship of engagement—operationalized in many forms and in many institutional types. In recent years, efforts by the National Clearinghouse on the Scholarship of Engagement, Imagining America, and Community-Campus Partnerships for Health offer model faculty statements, organization of vita, strategies for dissemination, and peer evaluation of the

scholarship of engagement. These strategies have the benefit of providing another layer of intentionality and quality to the work that can add to its quality and impact, regardless of how they play in institutional reward systems. And much scholarship of engagement will fair well in traditional reward systems because it carries with it traditional research university currency (external funding, publications) as well as more community-impact oriented contributions. Similarly, the individual engaged scholar often has accrued other currency from more traditional research, and from other scholarly roles, that they bring to a promotion and tenure or contract renewal decision. However, what we rarely recognize is that in many ways the scholarship of engagement movement has had to argue for the rigor and value of the work using the criteria and assumed epistemology of the post-WWII positivist paradigm (Rice, 1996). If those involved in the scholarship of engagement were free from the constraints of some of these traditional conceptions of rigor, peer review, and dissemination embedded in what Gene Rice (1996) coined as the “assumptive world of the academic professional,” might they not present the values, skills, and contributions of their scholarship of engagement differently?

For example, many have argued that the scholarship of engagement involves a distinct set of values, skills and epistemology (O’Meara, 2008; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2008; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Rice (1996) points out that the “American scholar,” a phrase taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous address in 1837, values connection to community in scholarship, contextual learning, and directs learning toward practical application and social meaning. William Sullivan (2005) and Al Dzur’s (2008) writings on professionalism in American society remind us that there are values and skill sets that academics hold as professionals that make a distinct contribution

to public life. As we make the case for rewarding engaged faculty, we miss the boat if we do not recognize these broader skills and contributions faculty can make to civic spaces.

What are some of these values, skills, and contributions? While not unique to the profession of faculty\*\*, or even research universities\*\*\*, I build on the work of several scholars to suggest the following key values and skills of academic professionals that offer important contributions to public deliberation of critical issues (Dzur, 2008; Sterrett, 2008; Sullivan, 1995). They are:

*Systematic inquiry in discovery and learning.* Faculty are trained to take a problem or an issue and study it comprehensively, following tried methods that attempt to understand the complexity of it on many levels. This is not a value that supercedes the value of knowing something through personal experience, from indigenous knowledge. Rather it is one way to know and do that only a limited number of individuals have been trained to contribute to any given problem in society and which can make a major contribution to the consideration of complex problems and solutions, in partnership with other approaches.

*Critical thinking:* Faculty are socialized to question assumptions and biases, to project potential implications, and to analytically consider the logic and reasoning of arguments as they move from one point to another.

*Valuing of Multiple Perspectives.* Faculty are encouraged throughout their academic training to consider multiple viewpoints on issues, including those less popular today or politically correct. They are socialized to consider the evolution of thinking on issues and how different perspectives may be the product of pervasive social, cultural or political thinking today. In the best circumstances, they are encouraged to never reject a

potential solution because of who it came from but based on the merits of its potential to solve a problem.

*Reflection.* Reflection has long been a value of the research university as a place where faculty are isolated from political pressures and can pursue discovery independent of outside influences. While we can critique the pressures of reward systems and entrepreneurial partnerships on faculty capacity for reflection, few would argue that institutions do not value reflection as a means toward knowing. It is built into our classes, our dissertations and masters thesis, our books and our hallway conversations. Liz Hollander, former director of Campus Compact, said at a Wingspread meeting that one of the real assets of research universities is their ability to convene people together to discuss important issues in depth and over time. Reflection is thereby built into how we work individually and together.

*Interpretation of research and learning for new audiences.* While research universities prioritize dissemination of research to peer reviewed journals, academic presses, and disciplinary associations over more local dissemination (such as in community newspapers, through grant proposals, through new media, or to lay audiences), nonetheless, it seems erroneous to ignore the fact that most faculty have been trained to present their research, teaching, and outreach in a variety of forms and venues for different audiences. Whether it be translating a theory to a group of undergraduates new to the field, translation of one's own research directions for a university-wide personnel committee, a discussion of current issues emerging in the field for an NPR interview or local newspaper, faculty have often been called upon to play a translational role. This role can be critical in difficult times to a struggling democracy. If we just look

at the faculty called upon in the last 6 months to discuss ensuring fair elections, the current economic crisis, or global warming, we see the important role faculty with strong translational and teaching skills can play in informing critical discussions.

Over the last few years Boyte (2004; 2008a) and Saltmarsh and Hartley (2008) have argued that we need to stop presenting a purely technocratic view of faculty work in the community. That is, we need to stop legitimizing a faculty member's reason for being involved in public work as purely technical and expertise driven. I agree, though realistically I think that is the first reason many community partners seek out faculty and what brings them first to the table of public work. In fact, it was also one of the first things advocates of engagement suggested to faculty legitimizing their community work for promotion and tenure—"pull out your individual efforts and show your expertise."

However, by elevating how faculty expertise as a mathematician, sociologist, and/or urban planner is making an impact, I think we are only telling half of the story, and the half that can make faculty seem distanced and soloed from American society. We in fact give fodder to the jokes about the academic who can translate complicated mathematical codes but cannot make change in a store down the street.

Harry Boyte (2008b) has said eloquently—expertise should be “an ingredient to the work, but not the whole recipe.” Rather, Rice points out that in the vision of the engaged American scholar, “theoretical reflection and practice are mutually reinforcing, each enriching the other (p. 16).” In the best possible case we can make for engaged American scholars in research universities, it is a combination of the values and skills and potential contributions that faculty can make as academic professionals in terms of ability to engage (and often enhance others capacity in) systematic inquiry, critical thinking,

reflection, valuing of multiple perspectives, and communication of processes and products throughout the process *in concert with* expertise that is so important.

Some would argue that these values, skills, and potential contributions are subsumed in what it means to be a scholar in a particular discipline and in fact in recent arguments made for public sociology, anthropology, history and the like it is true they are embedded in ideal versions of these roles. However, as we know, research universities already tend to think too deeply in terms of disciplines as opposed to how faculty serve as a body in interdisciplinary and professional ways together—and thus I emphasize them as values, skills, and potential contributions of academic professionals across disciplines.

In fact, it does not have to be an either-or choice. When we make cases for faculty engagement in research universities—the choices are not: (a) show faculty as experts or (b) show faculty as non-experts; citizens with no connection to academic training or knowledge. Rather there are ways faculty contribute in public settings that do not require only expertise but values and skills that are a part of academic life. These values and skills are *one* key set of ingredients to a good partnership and project, and we do the work a disservice if we do not acknowledge and laud them.

In fact, we know that faculty who have been deeply socialized toward these values and have developed these skills cannot help but display them in working on projects with community partners, or in their own communities as citizens. They become a part of how faculty think and act and relate.

Clearly this could be critiqued as another expertise argument. That is, the thesis could be taken as another way to laud already over-privileged faculty and what they do—just in a different way than expertise. That is not my intent.

Rather my intent is to offer another vision of how faculty can be involved in the most pressing public issues that can be valuable. No faculty member leaves their expertise in one area or another at the door of a partnership nor should they; however, nor should we underestimate the other values and skills of academic professionals, many of which are honed in research universities. It should also be said that without a strong sense of humility about one's expertise, and academic values and skills, and without a true interest in reciprocity and valuing of indigenous knowledge and local contexts, as well as the skills of other professionals involved in projects, faculty will likely not make significant community contributions.

Returning to the example of President-Elect Obama, I would be lying if I did not say I look forward to hearing him sound like a professor. I am thirsty for the kind of informed, complex, nuanced thinking he already has demonstrated which allows him to represent positions with which he disagrees without disrespecting the people who have them. Given the current state of the economy and our two wars, I want him to show me what he knows and tell me how he knows it. I want this because I want change, and I believe trained intelligence on a problem can be a key ingredient to change. Of course I believe this, as I am a product of several universities (as well as a strong liberal arts college education, where many research university faculty begin to form such habits, values, and skills).

However, I also want to see this former professor interpret in lay terms what his experts tell him, I want him to meet with people experiencing the issues on an every day level and see what they say should be done, and I want him to listen to and constantly be aware of diverse perspectives. I want to see him admit he is taking a step back when



things don't work, reflecting before acting. And in doing so, he will (I hope) represent the very best of faculty in public work. We, in fact, will have realized a vision of the "New American Scholar" in the White House.

\*The title of the essay combines two important titles, *Making the Case for professional Service* by Ernest Lynton (1995) and *Making the Case for the New American Scholar* by Gene Rice (1996).

\*\*As noted by Al Dzur (2008) the best aspects of the professions of Law, Journalism, Medicine, and Politics also display such skills and values.

\*\*\*Many will recognize these values and skills as liberal arts goals, which does not dilute the importance of them when practiced by academic professionals with many more years to develop and practice them in the service of real partnerships on important issues.

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