

Academic citizenship in an age of anti-intellectualism

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the fundamental idea that established theory can guide faculty professional service to inform and educate the general public. More specifically, we explore how faculty can use Boyer's scholarship of engagement as a framework for faculty academic citizenship and partnering with external audiences. Two recommendations are made related to intentional structural changes to universities as organizations for faculty academic citizenship to be relevant and make important contributions in the future.

Keywords: academic citizenship; anti-intellectualism; Boyer Model; scholarship of engagement; faculty

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Introduction

Beginning in the 1990s, external criticisms of higher education in general, and of faculty in particular, have increased in number and rancor. Specifically, faculty are often characterized as disconnected from the real world and not effective in preparing students for today's workforce (Finkelstein et al., 1998). These criticisms emanate from a general misunderstanding of what faculty do, coupled with higher education's inability to effectively communicate about faculty work. Fueling the public's skepticism about faculty productivity and effectiveness is the growing tuition costs associated with higher education. As public funding has declined (particularly since the 2008 United States economic recession), more of the financial burden is placed on students and their families via tuition and fees to fund higher education. The public, seeing the increasing price tag, grows increasingly wary of the autonomy previously enjoyed by colleges and universities, thus calling

for increased accountability and scrutiny of spending. All of these factors have challenged faculty and administrators across higher education to reframe the role of colleges and universities in their communities, to rebuild the political and social capital that was lost, and make the work of the academy relevant to society's most pressing problems. Doing so requires a different way of communicating and working with the public. This essay focuses on the fundamental idea that established theory can guide faculty professional service to inform and educate the general public. More specifically, we will explore how faculty can use Boyer's theory of the scholarship of engagement—defined in Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) as an examination of faculty priorities and a redefinition of scholarship—as a framework for faculty academic citizenship and partnering with external audiences.

Public service has been a long-standing part of faculty work. Previous research on faculty careers in United States higher education identified that junior faculty directed much of this service toward their academic disciplines, professional associations, and peer review, with less value placed on applying one's scholarly expertise to more mainstream audiences (McCall et al., 2016.). However, the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle and the use of social media to reach more mainstream audiences provide faculty with a wide array of opportunities to effectively share their scholarly expertise for the public good.

One conclusion from the 2016 London Seminar on Higher Education and the Media was that 'there is a relative lack of public figureheads amongst academics' (Bell, n.d., para 4). Seminar attendees debated the perception of an inward-looking nature among higher education institutions and a low level of enthusiasm to engage with a generalist audience. Conversely, Looser (2017) reflected on a series of personal experiences that thrust her into the media spotlight and stated that 'Britain is doing more than [the United States]' to take on the role of public intellectual.

Similar to the adage 'silence is assent,' when experts voicing their professional opinions are absent, those who take advantage of opportunities to speak out become representatives for higher education as a whole. As Bell (n.d.) observed, '[i]n an age of homespun journalism where everyone can share their story on social media, higher education has an even bigger challenge to get its voice heard and the value it can add to news debate fully realised' (para. 4). Nichols also addressed this in his 2017 book, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. In the book, Nichols critiqued the populist rejection of the idea of expertise in the United States, replacing it with 'a sanctimonious insistence that every person has a right for his or her own opinion to

be heard...’ (Nichols, 2014, para. 6). Now, after conducting a few Internet searches and skimming a few Wikipedia pages, people of all educational levels believe they are content experts and can purport to claim intellectual expertise equal to that of degreed professionals, including professors.

A 2016 London Telegraph poll that questioned supporters of both Brexit ‘leave’ and ‘remain’ referendum campaigns underscored the mistrust of expertise (Bell, n.d.). Large proportions of respondents agreed that ‘it was wrong to rely too much on expert opinion,’ and poll results identified ‘public perception of academics as having a left-wing agenda, which a large proportion of people don’t identify’ (Bell, n.d., para 6). In the United States, views of higher education as an institution are distinctly divided by political affiliation. As evidenced by the results of a national survey by the Pew Research Center, approximately half of the American public believes that colleges and universities continue to have positive impacts on society (Parker, 2019). Further, 67% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning respondents agreed that colleges and universities have positive effects, which is unchanged from recent years. However, 59% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents now view colleges and universities as exerting negative effects on the country, up from 45% the previous year.

Increasing levels of anti-intellectualism in American society have played an important role in the devaluation of the public intellectual (Drezner, 2017) and the objective credibility of empirical evidence. Hofstadter’s (1963) book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* analyzed social movements in American society in 50-year increments and defined anti-intellectualism as ‘resentment of the life of the mind, and those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition to constantly minimize the value of that life’ (p. 7). By extension, education, philosophy, and science are devalued and viewed as politically motivated, whereas common sense is superior to formal knowledge and expertise, and how one feels is more important than what one knows.

Hofstadter (1963) began with an assessment of the Puritan ministry in the 1600s as ‘a thinking community,’ documented the subsequent devaluation of the American intellectual, thought through the medical charlatans of the 1800s, and concluded with an analysis of McCarthyism in the 1950s. Susan Jacoby was deeply moved after reading Hofstadter’s book in college and wrote an update in 2009, partially in response to the George W. Bush presidential administration's political and intellectual shifts. She addressed many of the same influences on anti-intellectualism: organized religion, social pseudoscience during the culture wars beginning in the 1980s, and technological advances that create distractions from intellectual thought. Goldstein (2008) compared and contrasted these two books,

and portrayed Jacoby's book as controversial because of her disdain for electronic media and 'lamenting "the videoization of everything" in an "aliterate" society in which people have no interest in reading books' (p. B4). These trends have directed attention from the conservative public to some faculty scholarship that is viewed as politically controversial, and this raises the important question: What are professors' responsibilities as academic citizens to provide professional service in educating the public to combat misinformation and lack of critical thinking on important contemporary issues? In other words, how should universities and the professors they employ contribute to the improvement of the societies in which they live?

Overview of academic citizenship

Macfarlane (2005) noted that faculty work was rarely portrayed in terms of a citizenship or professional service role and proposed three elements of academic citizenship: political literacy in institutional decision-making; community involvement in internal and external contexts; and social and moral responsibility for supporting students and colleagues, defending knowledge, and communicating with the public (p. 300). Conceptualized broadly, Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016) advanced the idea of academic citizenship and identified the connection between universities and society as the 'intertwining of participation in, engagement between, and mutual responsibility of, universities and society' (p. 4). Beatson et al. (2021) described academic citizenship as 'a term used to capture activities that support and offer services to both the university and wider society, other than research and teaching' (p. 716) and reviewed several definitions in the previous scholarly literature. The authors noted that the primary focus of faculty work has changed from participating in collegial activities to productivity that is incentivized toward achieving specified academic performance metrics. As a result, faculty attention to academic citizenship activities has declined over time. Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016) also extended Macfarlane's (2006) call for universities to regain their academic citizenship as service to the public by focusing on engagement with the public to facilitate education beyond campus perimeters.

Faculty efforts toward academic citizenship help colleges and universities fulfill their institutional missions in general, and their civic purposes in particular, through the creation and dissemination of knowledge that is beneficial to society. In this way, faculty can contribute to their institution's commitment to advancing civic development and education for the common good. Other outcomes of these

academic citizenship efforts can be to foster critical thinking in local, state and national discussions about important contemporary issues and strengthen democratic values, skills, and habits. Increasing anti-intellectualism in regard to basic historical facts and mistrust in science—particularly in response to the global pandemic or climate change—is a specific characteristic of society that can benefit from increased faculty attention toward academic citizenship. One way this faculty work can be framed from an institutional perspective is through the scholarship of engagement.

The scholarship of engagement

In the works of Ernest Boyer (1990, 1996, 1997), he initially proposed a new paradigm of scholarship that assigns four essential functions to the faculty role. He distinguished among the scholarships of (1) discovery, which pushes ‘back the frontiers of human knowledge;’ (2) integration, which places ‘discoveries in a larger context’ by creating ‘more interdisciplinary conversations;’ (3) teaching, which frames scholarship as a ‘communal act’ that keeps ‘the flame of scholarship alive;’ and (4) application, which addresses societal issues, thus ‘avoiding irrelevance’ (Boyer, 1996, pp. 22-23). He later revised this paradigm to add a fifth scholarship, the scholarship of engagement that connected the resources and expertise of higher education to society’s most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems. In describing the scholarship for engagement, Boyer described his own growing conviction that what is needed is a ‘larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation’s life as we move toward century twenty-one’ (Boyer, 1996, p. 27).

Building on this notion, Checkoway (2013) noted that the scholarship of engagement is the development of knowledge for a public purpose and thus requires engaged scholars who think and act as concerned and invested citizens of society. By centering their scholarship on consequential social problems and developing knowledge for the well-being of society, any scholar can be an engaged scholar.

Former president of Harvard University, Derek Bok (1990), warned of the danger of higher education detachment from the public discourse when he wrote,

Armed with the security of tenure and the time to study the world with care, professors would appear to have a unique opportunity to act as society’s scouts to signal impending problems long before they are visible to others. Yet rarely have members of the academy succeeded in discovering the

emerging issues and bringing them vividly to the attention of the public. (p. 105)

Over thirty years later, with exponentially rapid knowledge generation, this warning appears prophetic. When looking for solutions to the problems that plague modern society—such as climate change, cybersecurity, global famine and disease—world leaders now consider private industries as “real-world” expert resources to complement the work of scholars who study these problems. The presumption is that industry leaders are sometimes more pragmatic and solution-focused. In order to curb this detachment—perceived or otherwise—higher education would benefit from shifts in processes and messaging, both large and small, across all functions of faculty work. The next section addresses how these processes and messages may be reimaged in higher education.

Faculty incentive structures

Criteria for promotion and tenure in higher education have remained largely unchanged over the past 50 years, in spite of the changing demographic profiles of the faculty who participate in it and the needs of the public who benefit from it. For those on the tenure track, scholarly publications and external funding for research remain the coin of the realm, often at the expense of teaching and service. Scholarly publications include peer-reviewed articles in academic journals that are prized by disciplinary scholars, but are written for extremely narrow audiences of subject matter experts and are difficult for the general public to comprehend. These journals often have long lag times between submission and publication that can be measured in years, rather than months. While the open-access journal movement has significantly increased the availability of scholarship in the past decade, only a select few elite scholars can afford the publication fees. Basic research funded by federal granting agencies and not-for-profit foundations often has limited influence on social policies and practices simply because the findings are designed for use by other academics and not delivered to policymakers and practitioners in an effective way.

Public scholarship, that which is conducted with and for public audiences, is often undervalued and viewed as not meeting the high academic standards. Yet, it is public scholarship that brings academic influence into public spaces in order to generate knowledge discovery, learning, and service that are relevant to social issues and problems (Bridger & Alter, 2006). These public spaces could also serve

as the classrooms and laboratories for higher education as faculty would find opportunities to embed service learning or problem-based learning into their teaching. Connecting students with public interest creates opportunities for them to develop a civic-centered mindset that challenges them to reflect on how their chosen disciplines can improve the lives of those in their communities.

This is the promise of the scholarship of engagement, conceived by Boyer (1997), that bridges the divide between scholarly research and practice. Faculty incentive structures must value teaching and research that informs public discourse and practice, just as they value traditional forms of teaching and research that inform other academics. Faculty are prepared to bring a rigorous methodology to examine intractable social problems and, in doing so, meet the values and priorities of the public with a healthy clinical objectivity. The public, in turn, can trust that the resulting scholarship and teaching would be free from ideological, technocratic, and financial bias. Higher education, interacting and engaging with the public in this way, would fulfill the promise to the good of society that Bok (1990) described.

Concluding discussion

In a treatise on faculty service roles in higher education, Ward (2003) noted that faculty are the ‘foot soldiers of campus engagement with the community’ (p. iii). This grassroots approach to academic citizenship has been, and will continue to be, an important role of the university. However, for faculty academic citizenship to be relevant and make important contributions in the future, this approach must be combined with intentional structural changes to universities as organizations.

Focusing specifically on connections between universities and society in U.S. higher education, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching sponsors an elective classification for community engagement. One purpose of this classification is to ‘prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good’ (Carnegie Elective Classifications, 2022, para. 1). However, only 361 U.S. institutions of higher and postsecondary education (out of approximately 4000) had earned the classification as of 2020 (Bonner Foundation, 2022). To institutionalize faculty academic citizenship more broadly, universities need to increase intentional efforts to align their institutional missions with faculty reward systems. Institutions with mission statements that adhere closely to the priorities identified in the tenure and promotion system place faculty in a better position to contribute to achieving their stated goals.

Another structural change would be to redesign institutional programs for faculty professional development and for preparing future faculty with curricula that teach discipline-based methods of academic citizenship. Wapman et al. (2022) found that 80% of all faculty members with PhDs in the United States trained at just 20% of universities. Of these 20%, five just doctoral training universities prepare 12.5% of all U.S.-trained faculty members: the Universities of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Wisconsin-Madison, and California-Berkeley, and Harvard and Stanford Universities. Doctoral/Research universities that prepare future faculty could develop formal institutional programs that mirror the STAR Scholars Network program (STAR Scholars Network, n.d.) to intentionally address academic citizenship. Comprised of four self-paced modules, the final STAR Scholars Network module focuses on preparing doctoral students to be ‘scholar-citizens’ by teaching them to ‘create a thoughtful, ethical balance between contributing to the academic community and to the larger social community’ (Cassuto, 2022, para. 24).

As Boyer (1996) noted,

I’m convinced that ultimately, the scholarship of engagement means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, helping to enlarge ... the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us. (pp. 19-20)

Colleges and universities can use the scholarship of engagement as a way of removing the ‘us vs. them’ barriers between the academy and the public. In doing so, the work of discovery, integration, teaching, and application connects faculty with community needs beyond the campus. The public becomes a partner in that work rather than a bystander. Based on their individual areas of content expertise, professors can chart future paths of academic citizenship, make positive impacts on the broader society, and demonstrate the ‘public good’ as an outcome of higher and postsecondary education to the general public.

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