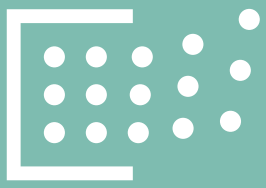
CHAPTER

6

ENGAGEMENT LEADERS



Outreach and extension programs that bring academic knowledge and expertise outside the ivory tower are nothing new, particularly at land-grant universities and their non-U.S. peers [1]. However, emerging social and environmental challenges mean existing structures are often not fit to purpose for a rapidly changing society [2, 3]. New staffing models are needed to recruit and retain researchers who have the capacity to build relationships, seek out new partners, and co-create knowledge with communities [4]. In this chapter, we explore the importance of the "engagement leaders" who cultivate the leadership, capacity, and partnerships needed for the co-production of knowledge, itself so central to this mission.

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How can universities identify engagement leaders and strengthen their capacities in linking academia more closely with partners beyond the academy?

WHO AND WHAT ARE ENGAGEMENT LEADERS?

People often talk about two basic categories of long-term university scholars: "tenure-track" and "non-tenure track" [5]. In an engaged university, both of these groups drive innovation and orient the academy toward societal challenges. The chapter on tenure and promotion reform provides recommendations on how to support tenure-track faculty engagement leaders. But the second category, "non-tenure track" scholars, unfortunately tends to be defined only by what it is not.

With an eye to inclusivity, we redefine engaged scholars by who they are, what they do, and what they offer to the university community and to the world. More specifically, we recognize and elevate non-tenure track scholars' intentional efforts to build societal engagement into their work. We also explore how universities can better support the growth and visibility of this diverse group of faculty and professional scholars. We describe and honor an affirmative, inclusive community of high-impact scholars, along with their tenure-track colleagues who conduct similar work, as "Engagement Leaders".

Engagement leaders are university staff or faculty of varying ranks and titles who:

- bring a driving motivation, expertise, and capabilities aimed at real-world relevance and impact;
- lead or join networks of scholars with off-campus practitioners, researchers, communities, and decision-makers;
- develop skills to collaborate with non-academic communities in the implementation or co-production of science, innovation, and sustainable solutions, along with reciprocal skills for being usefully engaged by such communities [6];
- bring complementary experience working in governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and/or the private sector;
- often have educational credentials and CVs comparable to those of tenure-track faculty, along with applied or practical experience frequently exceeding that of tenure-track faculty;
- and work in myriad roles and have a wide range of positions, funding mechanisms, and institutional situations.

Engagement leaders may be called professors of practice, program or center directors, research scientists, extension agents/specialists, managing directors, policy or research associates, outreach coordinators, Indigenous liaisons, communication officers, practitioner faculty, and many other titles. But their pathways to recognition and promotion are less codified than those available to tenure-track faculty.

Engagement leaders contribute to creating an engaged university because:

1. **Engagement leaders bring real-world experience into teaching and scholarship, develop and deepen relationships and partnerships outside academia, and co-produce impact-focused research and experiential learning products.** They open doors to networks of opportunities for students. In addition to bridging the university and its communities, they often act as boundary-spanners within the university, connecting interdisciplinary teams, catalyzing insights, and developing multifaceted solutions for complex challenges.
2. **Engagement leaders are nimble, responsive, and adaptive to changing societal demands.** Making impact their primary mission, engagement leaders often structure their time differently than traditional faculty. They may prefer a reduced teaching load or condensed teaching schedule (e.g., short courses) to build in maximum flexibility for co-development. In line with the expectations of engagement-focused institutions, they may also have a more expansive view of the “ideal” products of academic productivity.
3. **Engagement leaders’ real-world impacts pay dividends for society and the university.** Engagement leaders together with their partners enhance institutional prestige, impacting communities and habitats, demonstrating the relevance of academic work to society, providing experiential learning opportunities, unlocking new sources of funding, and influencing scholarship and practice across fields. All these contributions help attract the top-level faculty and impact-oriented students.

They may also prove critical for attracting philanthropy, as alumni and foundations prioritize a visible, measurable social return on investment [7].

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ELEVATING ENGAGED LEADERS

The work of engagement professionals is already core to the missions of many academic institutions. However, for those in non-tenure track positions, employment can be tenuous due; financial and administrative realities and expectations or shifts in deans' or university priorities regularly imperil their positions and, therefore, their inclusion within the academy. Additionally, norms and practices within academia can impede their success [8]. But there are feasible, attainable reforms and immediate steps universities can take to support and foster engagement leaders.

Fund engagement work

Challenge: Many engagement leaders depend heavily (if not exclusively) on external grants to fund their own salaries, the work they do, and the staff and students they employ. This can create perpetual uncertainty about the stability of their employment [8, 9]. More importantly, it directly impacts their ability to drive mission-critical work by inhibiting the development of long-term, external relationships. Engagement leaders demonstrate the entrepreneurial spirit universities prize, yet they understandably have trouble building long-term research capacity when their funding is insecure.

Opportunities and Bright Spots:

- With reliable institutional support, flexibility need not mean insecurity. Instead, it can enable engagement leaders to target and sustain scholarship aimed at impact, filling gaps between ideas or solutions and their implementation. Successful co-production and basic talent retention demand creative budgeting and human resources approaches, since the needs of real-world partners rarely align with academic calendars, requirements for tenure, journal publications, normative academic language, and typical science funding models or reward systems.
- We recommend baseline funding for engagement-oriented positions from internal (non-grant) budgets, along the lines of two months' annual hard funding to public engagement and grant-writing activities. The Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota, as an example, uses a combination of university core support, philanthropy, and returned indirect funding for this purpose, while the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University uses a combination of institutional endowment, core support from the Office of the Provost, and philanthropic gifts (e.g., from board members).
- Virtually every grant program, anywhere on the spectrum from basic to applied interdisciplinary research, has some room in personnel budgeting to partially support engaged scholarship as we have defined it. Institutions should incentivize grant-seekers thoughtfully integrating this work into their external funding requests.

Establish clear promotion pathways

Challenge: The myriad positions in which engagement leaders sit often lack clear promotion pathways, making it difficult to build

a career in ways that parallel the security and stability of the tenure-track system [6].

Opportunities and Bright Spots:

- Create thoughtful career ladders with clear benchmarks for promotion for engagement professionals, regardless of where they fit in faculty/staff hierarchies or job title regimes. The University of Minnesota's aforementioned Institute on the Environment recently launched career and promotion pathways for all its research professionals, including a shift toward multi-year contracts which increase in duration given seniority. Promotion is determined through incentive structures that emphasize societal impact, public engagement and partnerships, and impactful interdisciplinary, community-engaged scholarship. These new policies have allowed high-performing engaged leaders to secure multi-year contracts and the recommendations are being integrated into new position descriptions.
- Create an "engaged scholar advancement task force," charged with, for instance, conducting an audit of HR policies (academic as well as professional or unionized staff) to ensure incentives align with engagement.
- Assess the current pool of engagement leaders to better understand who fills these roles and how they are contributing to the work of the engaged university. Conduct a baseline survey and then follow up to monitor success and challenges over time.
- Develop a recruitment and retention strategy specific to engaged leaders (see Chapter 7: Diversity, Equity, & Engagement). At the University of Washington, the Office of Academic Personnel notes that those holding the job title Professor of Practice must demonstrate a distinguished track record of accomplishment, yet they do not have promotion or voting rights, their positions are of limited duration, and their positions must be sparing. At Duke University, on the other hand, the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions created a new set of positions (program director, policy associate, and senior policy associate) specifically to bring in engagement leaders at multiple levels. There, the job descriptions are clear and tailored to the needs of engagement work.

Allow engagement leaders to be PIs on grants

Challenge: Though funding agencies rarely impose such limits, universities tend to require principal investigators (PIs) on grants to be tenure-track. This handicaps many engagement leaders, limiting their ability to fundraise and build independent research programs and tying them to tenure-track faculty partners who may have limited capacity, skills, and interest in engaged scholarship.

Opportunities and Bright Spots:

- A number of public institutions already use a set of predetermined and transparent criteria to select non-tenured engagement scholars who should be given PI status. This suggests private universities can look to their public peers for best practices, such as clear, published requirements for the achievement of PI status.

Provide sabbatical-like opportunities for engagement leaders

Challenge: Engagement leaders, like other non-tenure track faculty and professional scholars in most universities, are not offered sabbaticals, which are immensely valuable to both individuals and their institutions. For example, sabbaticals might enable secondments into government or NGO positions, prestigious fellowships, writing and speaking pursuits, or renewal of applied skills and networks, all of which could elevate institutional prestige and real-world impact.

Opportunities and Bright Spots:

- Similar to sabbatical faculty programs, encourage periodic opportunities for experiences outside the university that further the capacities of engagement leaders in scholarship and/or engagement and provide financial support. Such competitive programs could be supported by indirect cost returns or by targeted fundraising.
- Integrate these opportunities into job descriptions and benefit packages to better expand the hiring and retention of engagement leaders.

Provide endowed positions or fellowships to engagement leaders

Challenge: Where engaged leaders are not supported by "hard money" budget lines or sustained capital campaigns, fundraising rather than strategic impact can drive their work, making it difficult for them to build the long-term relationships and programmatic capacity necessary for external impact.

Opportunities and Bright Spots:

- Under the direction of university leadership, development professionals should think creatively about endowed, continuous capital campaigns or other sustained funding models for positions (academic or professional) that drive the enduring, measurable impact of engagement professionals in institutions and communities. Philanthropic "bang for the buck" may be even greater if targeted at a variety of career stages or if endowment funds are sought from a greater variety of donors or funders.
- For example, Boise State University offers its donors the option to fund an Endowed Lectureship that "provides supplemental funding to support the scholarship, teaching, research, outreach and public service activities of a college, department or program" at a substantially lower donation level than is associated with chair endowments. Similarly, engagement-centric postdoc, graduate, or staff fellowships could offer high societal impact relative to the cost of traditional faculty lines.

Cooperate on mission-driven fundraising

Challenge: Engagement scholarship often requires fundraising through foundations or private individuals that goes beyond integration into existing traditional scientific grants. Universities with strict fundraising rules can increase internal competition across schools and departments, making it difficult to fundraise for interdisciplinary engaged scholarship.

Opportunities and Bright Spots:

- Inspirational, mission-driven funding campaigns can be built using a cooperative model

working to raise resources to meet multiple missions across campus (e.g., education, research, and engagement). For instance, the highly salient challenges of sustainability and climate change might engage expertise and capacities across a university, while funding is often targeted by position, program, or college.

- Recent climate and sustainability focused programs at a number of the Beyond The Academy partner universities (e.g., University of Arizona, Stanford) that encompass engaged scholarship have been/are being funded as major institutional initiatives built to coordinate fundraising across schools and units.

Develop a shared culture of engaged scholarship across various position types within the university

Challenge: A longstanding cultural divide between university faculty and staff creates inefficiencies in engaged scholarship and impact by creating friction and reinforcing unhelpful power dynamics rather than building potentially ground-breaking collaborations [10, 11].

Opportunities and Bright Spots:

- Incentivize and promote a culture of shared value in engaged leadership (see University of Alaska, Fairbanks Spotlight on page 80).
- Provide clear definitions and examples of what impact means in the context of linking research with partners outside the academy. The Gund Institute for Environment at the University of Vermont developed a shared theory of change (see glossary) and a list of desired impacts that were applied to all affiliated researchers.
- Foster intentional communities of practice on and off campus, in which engaged scholars—regardless of university rank, title, or status—meet regularly to discuss the work of engaged research, learn and share best practices, work out collaboration issues, and strengthen networks. Prioritizing and regularly scheduling these activities builds trust, respect, and shared values and aids the university community in recognizing the value and contributions of all engaged scholars.
- Demonstrate the value of engagement leaders' experiences in diverse ways. Recognizing the skills of engagement leaders and prizing their time outside of academia by hiring, adequately supporting, and celebrating them sends a signal that their work matters and sets up a virtuous cycle in which more will sign on to do the work of the engaged university. This increases engagement leaders' career mobility and flexibility alongside faculty, professional scholars, staff, and students.

SPOTLIGHT

DUKE UNIVERSITY'S NICHOLAS INSTITUTE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY SOLUTIONS

Founded in 2005, the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions is designed as a two-way bridge between academia and decision-makers. It endeavors to provide timely, non-partisan research, tools, and facilitation support to help address environmental challenges. Within Duke, the Institute sits under the Office of the Provost and is designed to draw expertise and insight from all the schools (Law, Engineering, Environment, Public Policy, Divinity, Arts and Sciences, etc.).

The Institute's senior staff are non-tenure track engagement leaders, primarily dually appointed to the Institute along with the professor of practice, adjunct, and lecturer appointments at partner schools across campus. Senior staff are supported by a team of earlier career engagement leaders holding policy and research associate positions.

Unique attributes and strategies support the engagement, co-production, and impact-focused work of the Institute.

An institute built for co-production and engagement

- The Nicholas Institute was established as a separate unit built entirely around an external engagement and impact mission that aligns staff incentives and project selection (research) around these goals.
- It selects engagement staff for their diversity of academic and non-academic experience, as well as their ability to bridge external audiences and academic research.
- It enables staff to be effective co-producers because they are not tied to a specific set of academic expertise (they can partner with experts across campus or outside Duke); can be flexible in terms of research topics and deliverables (policy briefs and online tools, in addition to peer-reviewed papers); and have opportunities to assess the needs of relevant decision-makers and make relevant contributions.
- Staff evaluation and promotion are based on success in developing and completing successful co-produced deliverables with key partners, not peer-reviewed papers.
- Supported projects are selected on the basis of their potential for impact and fit with the expertise and capacity of the Institute and Duke partners.

Institutional support

- Funding from an institutional endowment and from the University's strategic funds (from indirects) covers around 50% of the Nicholas Institute's costs, supporting engagement staff and providing seed funding to enable researchers to follow the work rather than the funding.
- **Equity in compensation.** The salary of the senior engagement leaders sits between the average salaries of the associate and full professors (higher-tier tenure-track positions) at the University.

Faculty appreciation

- Engagement leaders are respected for the networks and knowledge they bring, encouraged to teach courses, bootcamps, and guest lectures across campus to share their on-the-ground experience with students in many disciplines.
- Engagement leaders from the Institute are brought into thought leadership positions, helping to develop a new, campus-wide initiative on climate change.

Sabbatical opportunities

- The Institute's engagement leaders are regularly invited to participate in sabbatical-like opportunities including secondment into government positions or participation in Fulbright fellowships to build bridges with new stakeholders and experts. Currently, these opportunities require external foundation support, however, which limits their uptake.

SPOTLIGHT

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA INTERNATIONAL ARCTIC RESEARCH CENTER (IARC)

Founded in 1999, the International Arctic Research Center (IARC) at the University of Alaska's flagship research campus in Fairbanks (UAF) was created through a joint agreement between the United States and Japan. Its mission is to "demonstrate our ability to solve, jointly, problems that are beyond what any one nation can address." Over time, IARC has expanded its circumpolar reach, while adding talent to sustain critical relationships, networks, influence, and relevance within Alaska.

Established as a group focused on basic research, in recent years the IARC has increased its emphasis on policy-relevant, community-oriented research. Core staff are supported by a handful of large federal grants that have built IARC's reputation—across political and cultural divides—for developing and translating climate scenarios for agencies, communities, tribes, and businesses. The implications of their research hold promise for remote villages as well as global capitals. Today, the IARC employs more than 100 scientists, analysts, students, and staff who share their abundant talents and resources throughout the community, actively cultivating relationships and skills for diverse partnerships, regardless of their status as tenured faculty, other faculty, or staff.

The IARC value proposition rests on the recruitment, retention, and advancement of engaged leaders in the following domains:

Research

IARC researchers have built long-term relationships with Arctic Alaska coastal communities on the front lines of climate change. The Alaska Arctic Observatory and Knowledge Hub (AAOKH) provides resources, tools, and scientific information to communities, making them full research partners in the research process. Community members bring deep connections to place and integral knowledge of traditional marine and land resources. IARC researchers co-produce research with communities via tribal and community meetings and Indigenous student mentoring, collaborating and sharing thousands of field observations and measurements of changes in ocean, snow, ice, and ecology.

Education

Embracing a partnership with the UAF Honors College, IARC co-created the Climate Scholars Program, which empowers undergraduates, pursuing any major, to become action-oriented, climate change leaders. IARC research faculty hold joint appointments with the Honors

College. This allows them to retain externally funded research workloads driven by societal relevance and stakeholder priorities, augment their salaries, all while interacting with students to extend their geographic and generational reach.

Service

The flexible structure of IARC allows its scientists, communication experts, and grant-funded personnel—regardless of title or rank—to be visible and valued across the state. Sector-spanning, high-impact initiatives under the IARC umbrella include the Alaska Fire Science Consortium, the Alaska Climate Adaptation Science Center, the unique Community Partnerships for Self-Reliance program, and many more.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

These are “all hands on deck” times. Academia must push all of its talents and capitals to the fore to meet urgent challenges like sustainability and inequality. Acknowledging, valuing, and better supporting engagement leaders is essential to fostering university research that informs and accelerates active, diverse responses to societal problems. Many institutions have taken positive steps, and these must be scaled and shared as quickly and widely as possible. Cultivating engagement leaders is one among many pragmatic, actionable steps to building engaged universities.

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