

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whether “inside” or “outside” the academy, few people are insulated from environmental, economic, and social struggles. And most of them—most of us—want to leverage our time and talents to make the world a better place. Academics like to think of their work as relevant, but the biases and bureaucracies of universities, their cultures of insularity, hubris, and elitism, rarely encourage or reward researchers’ external impacts. This means the traditional university model is underperforming relative to its social and environmental potential.

**“We are the higher education we choose.”**

*-Gary Rhoades (2006),  
as referenced in  
O’Meara, 2021 [1]*

Further, today’s solutions-oriented students increasingly demand curricula and research opportunities that help them engage in the world around them. Graduate students and early career researchers enter the academy with high expectations, strong feelings of empowerment, and little tolerance for the status quo. There, they run smack into a mismatch between their institutions’ stated mission to serve society and the policies and reward systems that effectively limit those same institutions’ impact and relevance.

We, the Beyond the Academy network, have identified this as a critical time for evaluation, reflection, and reform. A global pandemic, uprisings in support of racial justice, and demographic shifts, among other factors, have only clarified the urgency: We must update the value proposition of the university. Funded by a grant from the National Academies Keck Futures Initiative in 2018, our network has hosted workshops, conducted extensive reviews of peer-reviewed literature, collected case studies, and identified best practices from across our institutional homes. We have sought out and compiled the best ideas for how to reform academic structures and promote more engaged, action-oriented scholarship that addresses our most pressing grand challenges.

**“Universities that are not engaged with their communities in the twenty-first century will soon find themselves disengaged from any meaningful relevance ...”**

*-Gavazzi & Gee, 2018 [2]*

There's good news; we found many promising innovations. Universities are creating offices of engagement, funding grants for community-engaged scholarship, training researchers in knowledge co-production, and reforming reward structures to value external impact. However, these bright spots remain uncoordinated experiments rather than contributions to systemic change. As one researcher puts it, the new wave of university-community partnerships are still too often "person-dependent rather than an integral part of the fabric of the institution" [3].

The next phase of academic reforms must build toward the broad institutionalization of engaged scholarship. We call this model "The Engaged University".

*The Guidebook for the Engaged University* gives the academy both a vision and a roadmap to a more impactful future, in which universities, including their scholars and staff, catalyze solutions for the world's most pressing challenges.

## Chapter 1: Building an Engaged Campus

Creating a culture of engagement requires involvement at every level of the university, from students to faculty, administrative leaders, and even curricula. An engaged campus requires the university to reorient, from a unidirectional provider of to a coproductive partner in socially relevant knowledge, expertise, and solutions.

### **The engaged university can be described as:**

- ▶ Making community-based research and service-learning key criteria in hiring, promotion, tenure, and resource distribution decisions.
- ▶ Providing strong institutional support for

university centers oriented toward public engagement and featuring widespread faculty/student participation.

- ▶ Prioritizing engaged research and service, such that interdisciplinary and collaborative work is common among faculty.
- ▶ Offering curricula steeped in service-learning and designed to include students in engaged research.
- ▶ Featuring commonplace community involvement designing, conducting, and evaluating research and service-learning curricula.

To get there, we offer assessment tools to help identify places where engagement can be institutionalized throughout the university and examples of accreditation programs, networks of engaged universities, and awards for engaged campuses helping transition institutions toward cultures of engagement.

## Chapter 2: Co-production as Best Practice

Co-produced research involves "processes that iteratively bring together diverse groups and their ways of knowing and acting to create new knowledge and practices to transform societal outcomes" [4]. Evidence shows that co-produced knowledge is more likely than traditional research to be considered socially relevant, publicly accepted, and useful in decision-making. It also requires more resources, time, and training. Research objectives are likely to change over the course of the engagement, creating challenges for projects with predetermined expectations or funding constraints. Co-produced research often faces institutional skepticism, and researchers take professional risks when choosing this approach.

### **The engaged university champions co-produced knowledge by:**

- ▶ Developing, training, and socializing its researchers in effective, engaged, and co-produced scholarship, emphasizing the imperative to build respectful, reciprocal relationships that foster mutual learning and center the needs of community partners.
- ▶ Lifting up examples of successful partnerships and highlighting community voices and contributions to impactful research outcomes.
- ▶ Dedicating funding for co-production activities that are difficult to finance via traditional grants and contracts.
- ▶ Acknowledging and taking into account the extended timelines and the potential risks of co-production in annual reviews and promotion processes.
- ▶ Expanding institutional definitions of “what counts” as knowledge in recognition that the research outputs that are most valuable to academics may not be the same as those deemed most valuable by their communities.

### **Chapter 3: Metrics for Assessing Research Impact**

Metrics signal what is important in the academy, and so they act as powerful incentives, shaping research investments and behaviors. When universities shift resources and expectations toward the change needed in the world, they must shift their evaluative emphasis to measure not only research quantity and prestige, but their applicability and impact. In other words, we need to think differently about how we measure research success.

### **The engaged university’s review policies and practices:**

- ▶ Encourage researchers to articulate their own theory of change and determine appropriate and trackable self-reported metrics, coupling these individualized measures with tailored mentoring to support professional development and promote departmental buy-in.
- ▶ Adopt a “narrative with numbers” approach, using quantitative measures to complement, rather than supplant, qualitative data and stories.
- ▶ Recognize and correct systemic and personal biases embedded in research and engagement assessments.
- ▶ Measure performance or merit against the mission statement of the research group, unit, or institution.
- ▶ Are evaluated and updated regularly across the long time horizon required to measure societal impacts.
- ▶ Are redeveloped and institutionalized alongside other engagement-oriented reforms to funding, recruitment, and promotion.

### **Chapter 4: Tenure & Promotion**

Universities want engaged faculty. But institutionalized practices of faculty reward rarely support that goal. Traditional promotion and tenure policies incentivize quantity over quality and disciplinary standards over external impact. Altering advancement structures will take time and culture change.

**The engaged university creates the conditions to encourage, support, and reward those who work toward real-world benefit. It does so by:**

- ▶ Aligning tenure and promotion guidelines with institutional and departmental mission statements and strategic plans, including public service and applied research.
- ▶ Framing scholarship as a continuum from basic research to engaged research, allowing scholars to self-identify their work, and developing promotion criteria accordingly.
- ▶ Making the tenure process transparent to applicants, new hires, and the general public.
- ▶ Creating promotion review criteria specific to community-engaged scholarship.

## Chapter 5: Training Engaged Scholars

Future leaders will face complex problems and difficult tradeoffs. Preparing students to meet the world's biggest challenges requires opportunities for students to exhibit and refine their values, experience realities different from their own, and to feel discomfort, manage ambiguity, and observe policy processes. Current graduate curricula push students to become specialists without perspective, technical experts who lack larger insights, and scholars unprepared for the competing values of the real world. Interdisciplinary courses and degree programs fall short when it comes to preparing students to effectively develop partnerships outside academia.

**The engaged university works to create future leaders by:**

- ▶ Deliberately and regularly modeling engaged scholarship, never shying away from the accomplishments nor the challenges involved.
- ▶ Providing training in community engagement, cultural competency, conflict management, and relationship-building across graduate fields of study.
- ▶ Experimenting with alternative modes of graduate education, including experiential learning, team-based PhDs, and partnerships with non-profits, agencies, and the private sector to provide mentorship and skill development.
- ▶ Encouraging students to not only fulfill their traditional degree requirements, but to produce public-facing knowledge products in the process.

## Chapter 6: Engagement Leaders

Expanding the engagement and impact of the university requires shifts in the duties and responsibilities of the campus community, including faculty, staff, researchers, and administrators. In order to address local, national, regional, and global challenges, universities will need leaders who can develop and sustain partnerships with communities, public agencies, businesses, NGOs, Indigenous governments, and other institutions and leaders beyond the academy. "Engagement Leaders" are key to the growth of engagement in initiatives. These include tenure- and non-tenure track academics and university staff who have the leadership skills and capacity to undertake and model co-production. Professionals throughout the university often have the skills and practical

experiences needed to collaborate beyond academia, but their pathways to recognition and promotion can be too murky to effectively incentivize the work it takes to become engagement leaders.

### **The engaged university cultivates and incentivizes engagement leaders by:**

- ▶ Recognizing, elevating and promoting engagement leaders' work in internal and external communications.
- ▶ Advancing financial parity by providing base funding for engagement-oriented positions from internal (non-grant) budgets.
- ▶ Establishing promotion pathways with clear benchmarks for engagement professionals.
- ▶ Offering professional development opportunities on par with those afforded tenure-track faculty, so that engagement leaders may, for example, be principal investigators on grants and earn sabbatical-like opportunities.

## **Chapter 7: Diversity, Equity, & Engagement**

Change that stands to truly address complex, interconnected issues must be based on diverse inputs, from diverse communities, and with equity and inclusion at the center. University goals related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are deeply connected to university policies around engagement. Not only are diverse scholars more likely to incorporate underrepresented groups in their research and to use interdisciplinary methodologies, engaged scholars are more likely to come from groups underrepresented in academia. This means institutions that recruit and retain diverse scholars are more likely to deliver impactful and innovative scholarship

that is attentive to the needs of historically marginalized communities.

An engaged university works toward total integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion across every aspect and function, because that journey stands as an example to partners, communities and students, establishing new norms for how change happens.

### **The engaged university fosters diversity, equity, and engagement by:**

- ▶ Publicly connecting researcher diversity to effective engaged scholarship and internally aligning institutional rewards and incentives to support both.
- ▶ Centering job descriptions around engaged work, interdisciplinarity, diversity, and departmental commitments to sustaining engaged scholarship.
- ▶ Recognizing the unequal burden of service that falls upon the shoulders of underrepresented groups of scholars and creating transparency about faculty and staff workloads across university activities in order to prevent engagement from adding to their invisible labor.

## Conclusion

We believe that engaged scholarship is the future of the academy—it is the only model that can hope to repair broken relationships with external communities, train effective changemakers, and truly leverage the resources of the university in service to society. Engaged universities are positioned to outcompete traditional universities for the best students, faculty, and researchers, as well as secure more public support and funding.

The preparation of this guidebook has made it clear that it is possible to do engaged, action-oriented scholarship in the academy and to be recognized and rewarded for that work. If your institution does not provide the infrastructure or support needed to foster cultures of engagement, we encourage you to share the best practices synthesized in this guidebook with your university communities.

We acknowledge that institutional change is not easy. The reforms we propose will require some aspects of university life to become less dominant while other aspects are allowed to grow and flourish. Priorities will shift as universities revise incentive structures and adopt new cultural norms. And no universal approach will work for all disciplines or departments. Context matters and solutions are best when they are championed locally by coalitions of dedicated staff, students, faculty, and researchers.

Our vision is for a university community where researchers are encouraged and empowered to seek solutions to complex societal challenges, where engaged and interdisciplinary scholarship is valued and incentivized, and where students are trained to lead in dynamic and demanding situations unbounded by sector or discipline. In this future, the academy is an inclusive, accessible, equitable, and welcoming place for ideas and individuals from diverse viewpoints and backgrounds. In this future, the engaged university revives public trust in institutions and makes visible the potential for higher education to advance new leaders and partner with communities to solve society's greatest challenges, whether they be neighborhood-level or planetary in scope.

## References

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4. C. Wyborn et al., “Co-Producing Sustainability: Reordering the Governance of Science, Policy, and Practice,” *Annu. Rev. Environ. Resour.*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 319–346, Oct. 2019.