

# Public Scholarship: A Priority of the Professoriate?

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## Abstract

The call for papers for the 2018 conference of the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS) included the following statement: “[C]ritical Black Thought is often met with hostility, censorship, and death threats or denigrated within current popular and political arenas.”

Academe provides a relatively safe home in which Black Thought—and other historically marginalized thought—can operate. Unfortunately, academe can also be an island, isolated from broader society. Far too often, academic publications and presentations only reach a small, highly compartmentalized audience. How can scholars reach the wider world?

The answer, of course, is public scholarship, but such scholarship is often inadequately rewarded by faculty tenure and promotion policies, a situation which unnecessarily stifles young voices.

At first, the condition of public scholarship may look hopeless, because campus politics and departmental inertia are difficult to overcome. However, academics interested in an expanded concept of scholarship—including public scholarship—have a surprising ally in an establishment figure: Ernest L. Boyer. During his long and distinguished academic career, Dr. Boyer served as chancellor of the SUNY system, the head of the United States Commission on Education during the Carter Administration, and, ultimately, as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He published numerous works on teaching and learning, including the seminal 1990 text *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, in which he proposed an expansion of the concept of scholarship beyond traditional research. This paper argues that, despite Boyer’s impeccable establishment credentials, *Scholarship Reconsidered* is actually a radical document, which provides a clear and inspiring blueprint for advocating for public and other non-traditional scholarship.

## Boyer’s expansion of scholarship<sup>1</sup>

Examining the state of university education in 1990, Ernest L. Boyer wrote, “Several years ago...it became increasingly clear that one of the most crucial issues—the one that goes to the core of academic life—relates to the meaning of scholarship itself” (1990, p. 1). Boyer found the narrow definition of scholarship to be stifling and contrary to the idea of a university as a place of learning. Concerning the arc of Boyer’s academic thinking, Kelly Ward wrote, “It was evident in Boyer’s work that he was gravely concerned that the sole focus on scholarship, as traditionally aligned with research, was compromising public trust in higher education” (2015, p. 213).

Proposing a broader concept of scholarship, Boyer wrote:

Surely, scholarship means engaging in original research. But the work of the scholar also means stepping back from one’s investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one’s knowledge effectively to students. (1990, p. 16)

In *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Boyer started with traditional research, which he labeled the scholarship of discovery. This category of scholarship “comes closest to what is meant when academics speak of

‘research’” (1990, p. 17). The scholarship of discovery involves the expansion of human knowledge. Examples of this type of research include an astrophysicist searching for the origin of the universe, a historian translating a recently-discovered ancient text, or a microbiologist investigating disease vectors.

As a complement to tradition research, Boyer envisioned three additional categories of scholarship, which are the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching.

The scholarship of integration gives “meaning to isolated facts, putting them in perspective” (Boyer, 1990, p. 18). The scholarship of integration recognizes that much of the work represented by basic research—the scholarship of discovery—is performed by ever more specialized experts. In one of the examples of basic research listed above, a microbiologist investigating disease vectors may focus on a virus and its insect carriers. It is quite likely, however, that such specialized research would omit critical aspects of a related epidemic, including sociological and economic factors. Thus, another researcher could bring together disparate elements of basic research to create a more holistic view of the outbreak. Such a project would represent the scholarship of integration.

The scholarship of application involves a scholar who asks “How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?” and “Can social problems *themselves* define an agenda for scholarly investigation?” (Boyer, 1990, p. 21). Boyer is careful to say that the scholarship of application is not simply “service,” as that term is used to describe a wide range of activities, many of which lack a scholarly component (1990, p. 22). However, opportunities do exist that allow a scholar to solve problems *and* generate knowledge. Work that has a practical, real-world outcome, such as designing an architectural project for an impoverished community, represents an example of the scholarship of application (1990, p. 23). Another example could be accounting students providing an audit for a non-profit organization.

The scholarship of teaching is based on the idea that the “work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others” (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). Later rebranded the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), the scholarship of teaching is perhaps the most widely accepted of Boyer’s three new categories of scholarship, supported by an academic society, the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (ISSOTL), founded in 2004, and several journals, including *The Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (JoSoTL), founded in 2001. As conceived by Boyer, the scholarship of teaching requires more than the routine preparation that all teachers perform; rather, the scholarship of teaching requires the thoughtful examination *and* dissemination of teaching methods, models, and projects.

*Scholarship Reconsidered* is one of the most referenced scholarly works of its type—particularly in the decade following its publication (Braxton, Luckey, & Helland, 2002, p. 19). Much of the response was cursory—a quick acknowledgement of Boyer, followed by a lateral to the question at hand. Most of the substantive response was positive, although some authors saw limitations or challenges in Boyer’s proposals (Chandler & Davis, 1998). This author, for example, saw conflicts within Boyer’s taxonomy and the response to that taxonomy, and omissions from Boyer’s taxonomy, so he proposed an expansion of Boyer’s forms of scholarship from four to seven (Cosper, 2015).

## **Boyer's scholarship of engagement: A call for public scholarship**

Writing in 1995, shortly before his death, Boyer grappled with the legacy of *Scholarship Reconsidered*, returning to a theme that occurs throughout his career: the role of America's universities in society. Despite what he saw as troubling challenges to academe, Boyer remained an optimist, arguing in "The Scholarship of Engagement" that

Still, our outstanding universities and colleges remain, in my opinion, one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic process in this country. I'm convinced that for this hope to be fulfilled, the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement. (1996, p. 15)

The scholarship of engagement is a broad concept that encompasses many terms, including "academic service learning," "public scholarship," "publicly engaged scholar," and more. For the purposes of this paper, the terms are divided into two broad categories: academic service learning and public scholarship.

Academic service learning, sometimes referred to as simply "service learning," is a pedagogical strategy through which students learn as they perform some form of service, often for a group outside the immediate university community. Academic service learning projects range from education majors assisting a local K-12 school to construction management students building a park pavilion. Although this author has lead academic service learning projects and believes in their value, this paper focuses on the other component of the scholarship of engagement, public scholarship, which seems more pressing in today's political climate.

Public scholarship entails a wide range of activities, including publishing a book for a general audience, writing an editorial in a major newspaper, holding a public lecture, or providing testimony to a legislative body. This side of the scholarship of engagement is concerned with ideas—facts to counter lies, data to counter ambiguity, and expertise to counter ignorance.

Boyer clearly saw a role for public scholarship through the work of the scholar-advocate, but he was concerned that universities were not doing their part. He wrote

I was fascinated by Derek Bok's observation...that the most consequential shifts in public policy in recent years have come not from academics, but from such works as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*, Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*—books which truly place the environmental, industrial, economic, and gender issues squarely in a social context. (1996, p. 19)

The need for scholar-advocates has never been greater. This year, 2018, seems to be a pivotal point in American history, much like 1968 was 50 years earlier. Big issues are being discussed, including #MeToo and sexual harassment, the continued impact of Black Lives Matter and national anthem protests, mass shootings, the blatant lies emanating from the current administration, attacks on mainstream media and objective truth, and increasing political polarization.

Reacting to this environment, historians Keisha N. Blain and Ibram X. Kendi wrote an article titled "How to Avoid a Post-Scholar America," in which they argued that current social conditions demand the

attention of scholars (2017, p. B3). Admonishing scholars to get out their comfort zone, Blain and Kendi argued that truth will not survive if it sits “on the sidelines” (2017, p. B3)

### **Challenges to a scholarship of engagement**

Although public scholarship may be desirable, effecting public scholarship presents many challenges.

Noting that almost every college “lists teaching, research, and services as the priorities of the professoriate,” Boyer observed that service is discounted during discussions of tenure and promotion, arguing that faculty who emphasize service “jeopardize their careers” (1996, p. 18). Writing a retrospective on Boyer’s work, Eugene Rice argued that the current system “discourages engagement and participation in community-based discourse” (2016, p. 31).

While the lack of prestige for the scholarship of engagement is a concern for all faculty, the issue is of the greatest concern to young, tenure-track faculty, since the “most innovative and vulnerable faculty may be particularly susceptible” to current tenure and merit policies (Colbeck & Michael, 2006, p. 9). Furthermore, tenure-track faculty are notoriously busy, juggling research obligations, teaching assignments, committee assignments, and many other tasks. How can public scholarship be part of such a heavy workload?

Colbeck and Michael argue that public scholarship should not be conceived as a new category of faculty work but rather a component of current work. They wrote

Public scholarship is not a separate faculty role, so [it] does not add further demands to an already overworked faculty. Instead, public scholarship is academic work, reframed as a unified whole, enabling faculty members to accomplish multiple scholarship goals simultaneously. (2006, p. 11)

Assuming a scholar has time to work on public scholarship, how can he/she be assured that such work will be respected within the department and across campus?

Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff examined Boyer’s expansion of the concept of scholarship and saw two potential concerns: first, the expansion of what counts as scholarship could weaken the quality of scholarship, and second, the difficulty faculty in one discipline could have examining the validity of scholarship in another discipline. To address those concerns, Glassick et al. developed a set of conditions to which all valid scholarship should adhere. Accordingly, they argued that valid scholarship should exhibit

1. Clear goals
2. Adequate preparation
3. Appropriate methods
4. Significant results
5. Effective presentation
6. Reflective critique (1997, p. 25)

A close examination of Glassick et al.’s list of requirements reveals that the list is fully compatible with public scholarship. In fact, “effective presentation,” as defined by Glassick et al., begs to be tested by a public audience. To define “effective presentation,” Glassick et al. ask these questions:

- Does the scholar use a suitable style and effective organization to present his or her work?
- Does the scholar use appropriate forums for communicating work to its intended audiences?
- Does the scholar present his or her message with clarity and integrity? (1997, p. 32)

Each of the above-listed requirements can be met by public scholarship. As Blain and Kendi argue, “It is possible for a book, an article, and a talk to be deeply scholarly, and at the same time fully accessible to individuals or all intellectual backgrounds” (2017).

### Going Public

Numerous resources are available for scholars seeking to take their scholarship public. Two of the more comprehensive resources are *The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World* by M.V. Lee Badgett and *Going Public: A Guide for Social Scientists* by Arlene Stein and Jessie Daniels.

M.V. Lee Badgett is a professor of economics and an expert in LGBTQ policy. In *The Public Professor*, she approaches public scholarship from the perspective of an advocate (the first chapter of her book is titled “Speaking Truth to Empower”). Throughout *The Public Professor*, Badgett is sanguine about the idea of public scholarship counting toward tenure and promotion. A condensed list of her advice includes the following:

- Be ready to tell your own story of involvement
- Collect letters attesting to your valuable work....
- Cultivate a network of other engaged academics who work on similar topics....
- Push for additional recognition of the value of engaged scholarship on your campus. (2015, p. 191)

The first two points—telling a story and documenting activities—are tips for a public scholar to demonstrate value to tenure and merit committees. While good advice, this advice provides no guarantee that a tenure or promotion committee will value a strong narrative and compelling documentation, unless those attributes dovetail with existing tenure and merit requirements. In other words, telling the wrong story well could be of little value to the faculty member seeking tenure or promotion.

Badgett’s third piece of advice concerns relationships. Badgett argued that cultivating a network of colleagues and others “will give you feedback and ideas that will make your research better” (2015, p. 90). Assuming that the members of a faculty’s network understand the tenure and merit policies at the faculty’s institution, such a network could prove valuable, whether the faculty member is subject to a traditional concept of scholarship or a more expansive concept of scholarship.

Badgett’s final piece of advice is probably the most important, particularly for tenured faculty and anyone else in a position of power. If empowered faculty believe in public scholarship, then they should advocate for public scholarship. This means serving on tenure and merit committees, where they have an opportunity to directly support the work of public scholars. Perhaps more importantly, this means working to rewrite tenure and promotion policies, so good public scholarship does not have to be approved on a case-by-case basis, but rather is rewarded because such rewards are embedded into the system.

In comparison to Badgett's book, Stein and Daniels are more cautious in their approach to public scholarship. In the final chapter of *Going Public*, titled "Making It Count, Making a Difference," Stein and Daniels provide five principles for public scholars. The first principle, titled "Know What Counts at Your Institution," strongly suggests that a tenure-track scholar work within the existing framework of his/her institution (2017, p. 166). Reinforcing the point, Stein and Daniels provided this piece of cautionary advice:

"Will this count for tenure?" is a question that plagues academics on the tenure track. Many people suggest that everything you do in those early career days should be an activity that "counts" toward tenure, either directly (like getting a peer-reviewed publication out the door) or indirectly (like attending a conference where you might cultivate peer reviewers for the eventual tenure file). (2017, p. 166)

Although Stein and Daniels ultimately urged scholars "to make a difference" (2017, p. 189), their cautious tone suggests that public scholarship may have to wait until tenure is achieved.

Arguable, such a strategy means that young scholars must spend five or more of their most productive years doing what counts, versus doing what matters. Writing in *The Chronicle Review*, Blain and Kendi asked, "Why can't a public lecture be esteemed as highly as a conference presentation?" (2017). Why indeed?

## **Conclusion**

Writing in 1995, Boyer argued, "[W]hat I find most disturbing...is a growing feeling in this country that higher education is, in fact, part of the problem rather than the solution" (1996, p. 19). That less-than-lovin' feeling has in fact been growing; a recent survey found that 58 percent of "Republicans and Republican-leaning independents" believed that higher education was a negative force in the country (Hartle, 2017).

Now is the time to re-engage with the public, using accessible outlets to demonstrate higher education's value. Communicating with the public does not always come naturally to academics, but as Ward observed, "Boyer's work gave people language and motivation to develop their commitments to serve the public" (2015, p. 211). Moreover, Boyer gave academics a framework which breaks out from the traditional concept of scholarship, a radical departure from the rigid formula that all scholarship must follow the path of traditional research.

How should faculty, particularly young faculty, answer Blain and Kendi's to perform public scholarship? What should innovative faculty do when established faculty and/or provosts are skeptical of cutting-edge scholarship? The answers can be found in the legacy of Ernest L. Boyer.

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<sup>1</sup> Material in this section originally appeared in a presentation given at World Workplace 2016 (Cosper, Building on Boyer and Schön: FM Scholarship in the University Community, 2016).