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DISMANTLING INEQUALITY REGARDING SCHOLARSHIP

KerryAnn O'Meara

Despite significant efforts by some leading research and doctoral universities to disrupt the status quo,¹ status, legitimacy, and resources still tend to favor scholars and scholarship that add knowledge to disciplines over knowledge that is aimed at improving contemporary public problems. Though many colleges and universities have become Carnegie engaged, their “regard systems” lag behind their intentions to integrate public scholarship into institutional missions and faculty roles and rewards.² As a result, public scholars whom I have interviewed feel as if they have to “disappear for a while” from their public scholarship, or “shut themselves in a back room” in order to publish more traditional scholarship in their fields.³ A complex system of higher regard for traditional scholarship, and neglect of or disregard for public scholarship, permeates most aspects of how faculty are recruited, socialized, evaluated, retained, and advanced on the tenure track in doctoral and research universities. Priorities and incentives within disciplinary associations and world and national ranking systems also contribute to this system that sustains traditional scholarship over public scholarship.⁴

The organizational systems that devalue public scholarship are very similar to what Joan Acker identified as “inequality regimes.”⁵ Although Acker’s work refers primarily to how organizations, such as universities, maintain inequality for women, people of color, and other marginalized groups, I think the concept of inequality regimes as “interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations” (441) is instructive for understanding what needs to change in faculty roles and rewards to support engaged scholarship.⁶

Take for example two very self-motivated scholars. Emory and Eileen arrive at their institution, Research University, at about the same time. Emory is involved in interdisciplinary, translational research on health equity for Latino/Latina communities in the School of Public Health; Eileen studies string theory in the physics department. The university immediately sets up Eileen with a huge research lab and equipment totaling over a million dollars, while Emory is encouraged to seek funding from state grants and foundations for his work on race differences in awareness of health issues and heart and diabetes screen-

ings. Eileen is asked to teach one class a year while Emory teaches four. Not surprisingly, after five years the investment made in Eileen pays off in federal research grants. She is heralded as one of the promising “star” scientists on banners that fly near the entrance to campus. Emory has found a way to partner with state and governments to develop five community-run health screening centers, which have resulted in over ten thousand people being screened for diabetes, who would not have had this possibility. Emory’s research, in partnership with a local health-related nonprofit organization, has reached the attention of the American Medical Association, is highlighted in a recent NIH report, and is regularly cited in local policy and op-ed discussions on health issues. However, Emory’s colleagues are concerned about his chances for tenure. Emory’s scholarship has not resulted in as many peer-reviewed articles as department colleagues deem appropriate or as many publications as his peer Eileen across campus, who will likely sail through the tenure process. Also, he often publishes papers and reports with partners from off-campus, which casts doubt as to whether he is really doing “research” or “service.”

Several years later, Eileen is recruited for a faculty position by Stanford and provided a hefty retention offer. Emory on the other hand, who just squeaked through the tenure process, has linked his research to the local area and therefore does not pursue or respond to outside offers. As a result his salary is forever less than Eileen’s despite stellar teaching evaluations and receiving the president’s medal for service. Ten more years pass, and Eileen and Emory both serve on many campus committees together. Eileen’s research receives awards from her disciplinary association and field, which improves her department and institutional rankings. She is given the title of “distinguished professor.” When she participates in key committees and taskforces on campus, her views are taken very seriously by colleagues. Eileen knows she is a valued member of her institution and has achieved every bit of legitimacy, status, power, and resources it is possible to obtain at her institution, simply by doing the intellectual work she wanted to do and was good at.

Emory has not had the same experience. He has been an associate professor now for twelve years because his colleagues feel his research does not have enough citations in the Web of Science and do not value the local and regional impact of his work as much as international reputation and status. He has been an excellent university citizen, serving on many committees related to community engagement. However, he has noticed that he tends not to get appointed to some of the more important committees—those that distribute resources and convey status (such as committees that make decisions about faculty research grants, annual faculty awards for research, and promotion and tenure). When he is appointed to university committees, he has observed his opinion is not listened to or weighed as heavily as opinions of colleagues like Eileen or others from more traditional science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. He continues to love his work, and to maintain strong relationships with regional health organizations and health policy leaders. These colleagues and relationships allow him continuous feedback on the impact of his work on health disparity in his state. However, he knows that to advance at his university, he will

need to shut himself away from these relationships for a while so he can do more theoretical work his department favors. Emory questions his value to his institution. There is a disconnect between the scholarship he loves and does so well and what his institution regards and rewards.

I want to make three observations about Emory and Eileen, who are both composite characters in institutional contexts threaded together from engaged and traditional researchers I have interviewed and learned from as colleagues in doctoral and research universities. First, although many scholars, including myself, have drawn attention to the bigger barriers and structures facing engaged scholars, such as graduate school socialization, the promotion and tenure process, and access to funding and faculty development,⁷ systems of regard, as I have called them, are also an accumulation of smaller moments of affirmation or disregard.⁸ Many engaged scholars receive awards from colleagues in the community engagement movement or from the community for their work. Yet on their own campuses they receive micromessages, similar to those described in gender studies as “little cuts” and/or microaggressions. Such messages send signals that public scholarship and those who do it are “less than” or not as good as those who do more theoretical bench science. Such messages are everywhere; they occur when public scholars are invited to serve on some committees and not others, when they receive annual merit reviews, when they see what is highlighted from the president’s office or what is lauded as the most important kinds of faculty scholarship by offices of research. Similar to Acker’s work on inequality regimes, the issue is not always how their work is discriminated against, as much as how much more others’ work is valued. Thus, supporting public scholarship and public scholars means addressing the big barriers as well as the smaller but nonetheless pernicious inequalities described above.

Second, I intentionally positioned the traditional scholar as a female faculty member and did not note the race of either scholar to make the point that such inequality can occur among engaged scholars and traditional scholars regardless of faculty gender and race identities. However, many studies have shown women faculty and faculty of color are drawn to work that has relevance to contemporary public problems. Women and underrepresented faculty face established inequalities in research and doctoral universities based on their social identities, which are only compounded when they are also engaged in public scholarship. Such contexts are further complicated when we bring discipline and field into the picture, as many studies have shown STEM fields with significant federal and industry funding tend to have more power and legitimacy on campus than professional schools, social science disciplines, and the arts and humanities, where many public scholars reside.⁹ Thus, reengineering research and doctoral universities to better support engaged scholarship cannot be separated from reengineering these spaces to have greater equality for women and underrepresented minorities, and greater equality in resources, prestige and voice among the disciplines on campus.

Third, imagine for a minute that department colleagues told Eileen that she could pursue string theory research if she wanted to, but she was unlikely to receive resources, status, legitimacy, or support from her institution to do so. Most

people would see this as an issue of academic freedom. Why, therefore, is it not an issue of academic freedom for Emory to try to understand, and then impact, health disparity between Latina/o communities and white communities? I think part of the reason goes back to how these different research areas are valued by their institution.

There is an underlying assumption operating in the regard system described above, that Eileen is doing “real science” that is more complex, rigorous, and thus deserving of institutional support and stature. Interestingly this is not an assumption shared by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which committed \$100 million to encourage scientists worldwide to fight our greatest health challenges—such as finding ways to provide vaccines in single doses for families that will not be able to travel back and forth to receive them, or developing low-cost nets to lessen the impact of insects in spreading diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. Likewise the National Academy of Engineering has adopted a set of twelve grand challenges, such as providing access to clean water, and restoring and improving urban infrastructure. Organizations that are hard at work trying to solve contemporary public problems have much evidence to suggest this work requires systematic, deep thinking, along with collaborations and partnerships, and is every bit as intellectually rigorous as the bench science developing cures for cancer, and theories related to how matter is organized in the universe. Such work, and the scholars doing it, deserve better. I believe the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) could play an important, reimagined role in supporting faculty careers and the public good mission of higher education institutions by publicly calling out universities that discriminate against scholars engaged in public scholarship, as an infringement on academic freedom.

It is true that the kinds of systematic disadvantages I have described present real barriers for engaged scholars and the work they are doing. However, there are also signs of hope. Disciplinary associations, national academies, NSF, and NIH, as well as many leading research universities, have taken steps to push for reform in academic reward systems; to provide funding, faculty development and mentoring for engaged scholarship; and to include community engagement in accreditation of academic programs. There are entrepreneurial, engaged faculty leaders who have found innovative ways to craft careers with one foot in the world of practice and one in academe, and do their best work because they hold both perspectives.

In conclusion, we are in a waiting period in many ways. As we wait for reforms to become the “new normal” it is critical to help engaged scholars navigate their academic homes, and find ways to thrive despite the existence of stated inequalities. Just as many doctoral and research universities have tried to alter the representation of women and minority faculty through affirmative action, cluster hires, and dual and career hiring, doctoral and research universities can take similar efforts to attract more public scholars to their campuses. Institutional leaders can recruit engaged scholars into their graduate programs, celebrate engaged departments on banners, and recognize the impact of such faculty members’ work in addressing grand challenges and local public problems.

Research and doctoral universities are large, complex organizations with

many subcultures and ways in which status, power, and information is transferred. There is not one thing that can be done to give public scholarship equal status. However, if we study, and try to dismantle the many organizational practices where implicit and explicit bias against public scholarship exists, our institutions will be better able to serve the public good, and to appropriately regard public scholars for their contributions to knowledge and our democracy.

Notes

1. Syracuse University, Tulane University, and University of North Carolina Greensboro for example, have all made efforts to revise academic reward systems.
2. John Saltmarsh, Dwight E. Giles Jr., KerryAnn O'Meara, Lorilee Sandmann, Elaine Ward, and Suzanne M. Buglione, "Community Engagement and Institutional Culture in Higher Education: An Investigation of Faculty Reward Policies at Engaged Campuses," in *Creating Our Identities in Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, ed. Barbara E. Moely, Shelley H. Billig, and Barbara A. Holland (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009), 3–29.
3. KerryAnn O'Meara, *Because I Can: Exploring Faculty Civic Agency*, Kettering Foundation report (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2010), kettering.org/publications/because-i-can-exploring-faculty-civic-agency/.
4. KerryAnn O'Meara, "Inside the Panopticon: Studying Academic Reward Systems," in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, ed. John C. Smart and Michael B. Paulsen, vol. 26 (New York: Springer, 2011), 161–220.
5. Joan Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," *Gender and Society* 4, no. 2 (1990), 139–58.
6. Joan Acker, "Inequality Regimes, Gender, Class and Race in Organizations," *Gender and Society* 20, no. 4 (2006), 441.
7. KerryAnn O'Meara, "Faculty Civic Engagement: New Training, Assumptions, and Markets Needed for the Engaged American Scholar," in *To Serve a Larger Purpose: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education*, ed. John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2011), 177–98.
8. O'Meara, "Inside the Panopticon."
9. Gary Rhodes and Sheila Slaughter, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).