© Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Volume 29, Number 3, p. 71, (2025)
 eISSN 2164-8212

Navigating Changing Maps for Public Engagement in Higher Education Contexts

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Abstract

Public engagement is becoming a critical element of U.S. universities' missions. Defining public engagement has become increasingly complex, however, and navigating the significant and diverse literature on public engagement can be daunting. This essay addresses this challenge as well as two others that make public engagement difficult for those feeling called (or pressured) to perform such work. We draw on our own public engagement experience and research to (1) conceptually scope out the terrain of public engagement literature and approaches, (2) articulate how the emerging problems of rapid intensification and hyperpolarization in American political culture make public engagement work ever more challenging for both faculty and students, and (3) call attention to the ways universities are often not bureaucratically or structurally aligned to meaningfully support and advance public engagement work. We conclude with some recommendations for how faculty, staff, and administrators might navigate these concerns.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement, public participation, public engagement, community engagement, higher education outreach

Higher education has experienced a sea change in its relationship to "public engagement" over the last several decades. Colleges and universities have bristled at accusations that they are ivory towers, insulated from life outside ivied walls and rarefied, esoteric intellectualism. They have been accused variously of promoting overly precious navel gazing, not providing enough access and support to underserved communities (or, at the other end of the spectrum, preying on them), not doing enough to prepare students to be successful in the "real world," not providing enough "return on investment" (ROI), and of being overly expensive, left-wing indoctrination echo chambers. Critics of higher education have written extensively about what ails higher education in the United States today, resulting in an ever-expanding corpus of work taking aim at how colleges and universities are failing students and their families (e.g., Craig, 2015; McMillan Cottom, 2018; Selingo, 2013; Treadgold, 2018).

At the same time, higher ed is a favorite target for political actors making good on the nation's turn toward populism. As has been the case cyclically throughout recent history, higher education frequently stands in for elitism and groupthink. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, arguably the two most prominent industry publications in higher education, have been sounding repeated alarms regarding how colleges and universities are major battlegrounds in contemporary culture wars. These struggles over American higher education are clearly proxy wars for partisan battles over American values, belonging, and political power.

Higher ed institutions have responded to these accusations and attacks in a number of ways, ranging from developing extensive experiential learning and internship-rich curriculum options for students (e.g., Aoun, 2018) to investing in private–public partnerships intended to meet specific workforce development needs (e.g., Selingo,

2013). One of the primary responses, however, has been to shore up relationships between colleges, universities, and the public, often through coursework, projects, and initiatives intended to (1) provide meaningful, real-world learning experiences for students and (2) provide tangible value to various publics (for more on this topic, see Staley, 2019). These projects—which we group under the broad heading of "public engagement" efforts—allow higher ed institutions to point to how they solve problems and promote partnerships, and often build on preexisting research, teaching, and service missions. Public engagement efforts have become one of the primary ways universities avoid critiques of insularity (Fischer, 2023) and message the value of higher education to external audiences. There is also a growing body of work devoted to providing advice for becoming an engaged scholar and instructor, and understanding the challenges therein (e.g., Calice et al., 2022; Hoffman, 2021; Mirvis et al., 2021).

This intense focus on public engagement activities resonates with the four of us—between us, we have decades of experience working on such activities. We have professional training and practical experience with how to engage various publics, audiences, groups, or communities around varied social, environmental, political, and economic problems, and have worked as researchers, organizers, facilitators, and analysts on these issues. We have seen a significant increase in the number of faculty, staff, and students wanting to work with publics, and in universities calling on faculty and staff to do more of this kind of work. Collectively, we're aware of hundreds of diverse resources regarding the ethical and pragmatic dimensions of engaging publics. We've written formally about the challenges of doing this work (e.g., Fry et al., 2019; Lucena et al., 2013; Talley et al., 2016) and have supported hundreds of students' public engagement and participation.

In short, we believe there is much to be gained from working closely with and for communities and community organizations. However, we're also keenly aware of the many robust and compelling critiques of performing public engagement work without careful planning, self-reflection, ethics, care, and attention to power dynamics. There is a potential to do more harm than good when we engage various publics, and such engagement is frequently messy, time-consuming, and fraught. This essay aims to add to critical perspectives of public engagement work by mapping out three areas of concern that we grapple with as scholar-practitioners and that we believe are worthy of more attention: (1) domain complexity, (2) rapid intensification and hyperpolarization, and (3) institutional logics.

First, we address the challenges that faculty, staff, and students first entering into engagement practice and scholarship face. They must grapple with a wide variety of terminologies, values, and goals that make up the public engagement ecosystem. This *domain complexity* is increasingly challenging to navigate and teach. Second, we address the phenomena of *rapid intensification and hyperpolarization* of issues. By "rapid intensification" we mean that issues emerge on the public agenda relatively quickly; debate is brisk, with limited opportunities for reflection or revision. By "hyperpolarization" we are referring to the likelihood that engagement efforts at local scales might be increasingly impacted or shaped by broader political identifications and thus may unexpectedly and confusingly lead to conflict. Politics and conflict are nothing new to public engagement, but these phenomena can make it riskier, less tolerant of error, and more time- and energy-consuming than some might expect. Third, we discuss issues of *institutional logics* or the business and academic cultures of universities; these are the expectations, norms, and policies that organize the institution and its associated activities. There is an increasing gap between what universities and colleges say they want from or for public engagement, and the resources and support they actually provide to faculty, staff, and students. The problem is particularly acute for those institutions that lack elite reputations, state support, or large endowments.

Public engagement is as much a practiced art as an academic interest. Therefore, our analysis of these three challenges is buttressed by evidence from our own practices where we see these challenges emerging in situ. These examples from our own work in public engagement are included both to illustrate how we see these challenges taking shape in practice and as suggestions for future research: We hope future work will test our claims empirically and analytically to gauge whether these findings represent larger trends happening beyond our particular

contexts. We suspect they are and that they may only intensify in the coming years as the United States continues to grapple with social, environmental, political, and economic upheaval. We conclude with recommendations for institutions seeking to better support those engaged in, or seeking to engage in, public engagement activities. Given increasing institutional emphases on experiential learning, workforce development, and public engagement, there is more need to support navigating the challenges of doing this work without getting so bogged down in trying to do it so perfectly that we end up not doing the work at all.

Challenge 1: Domain Complexity

One of the challenges that brought us together to work on this essay was that, although we all work on some form of public engagement, we come from different disciplines that define public engagement differently, draw from different bodies of literature, and endorse different types of practices. Sociology defines and practices public engagement differently from urban studies, from public policy and administration, from communication, from philosophy, and so on. Practitioners who work with various communities may have altogether different goals and definitions. Therefore, when we come together to work on a project or to coteach an interdisciplinary course, we see that we all bring different bodies of work, different conversations, and even different value commitments to the table.

These diverse public engagement terms, values, and practices reflect what we have come to think of as domain complexity. By "domain complexity," we indicate the breadth, disciplinary span, methodological diversity, varying value assumptions, and disparate nature of the various disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and practical public engagement literatures that exist today. In his extensive review of engagement literatures, Kevin Burchell (2015) made this argument, recognizing that "the literature is diverse in terms of disciplinary populations and the frames of public engagement that it employs. . . . The implication of this is that the literature presents a somewhat unclear and confused picture" (p. 3). This confused picture prevents explicit and critical discourse around engagement that synthesizes lessons across diverse disciplines and practices, leading to "many academics seeing research engagement as an institutional and administrative set of activities, rather than rooted in academic theory and practice" (Fransman, 2018, p. 187). Furthermore, the engagement literature extends well beyond academic research to a gray literature developed by practitioners and professionals—roughly half of the literature reviewed by Burchell. As community engagement is necessarily a practiced art, the lessons learned from those in the trenches offer significant guidance. But this work also creates additional complexity to navigate.

This section seeks to provide a brief review of the literature as a way to demonstrate community engagement is not universally defined and therefore creates challenges for interdisciplinary work and community-engaged scholarship. We build on the work of Burchell (2015), Fransman (2018), and others by highlighting three ways in which domain complexity manifests in public engagement literatures: variation across *terms*, *values*, and *goals*. This complexity, which is increasing as more academics turn toward public engagement efforts, is heightened by cross-disciplinary efforts and what sociologist Kristin Luker (2009) called the rise of info-glut. We live in a time of unprecedented access to information often devoid of thoughtful categorization, evaluation, or synthesis. The realities of managing too much information, especially when it is organized by different terms and disciplines and across domains, can make it particularly daunting for someone who is new to public engagement literatures and practices to even know where to begin. It is unlikely that scholars and practitioners will resolve this complexity (such a task is likely inadvisable if not impossible), but naming the complexity and developing some strategies for navigating the diverse terms, values, and goals at play are important steps.

First, the terms of art for public engagement work vary, often shaped by the disciplinary conventions from which they emerged. In both the academic and popular literature, engagement processes are described variously as "stakeholder engagement," "public participation," "collaborative governance," or "engaged research," and with such varied terms as "'partnership' . . . . 'alliance' . . . 'collaboration' . . . 'coordination' . . . 'cooperation' . . . 'network' . . . 'joint working' and 'multiparty working,'" to name a few (Huxham et al., 2000, p. 339; cf. Fransman, 2018). We understand this list as a subset of the broader public and community engagement

practices conducted in the contexts of universities (Beere et al., 2011). Many of those practices, including community service, outreach, community-based research, and student-centered engagement practices such as service-learning, are beyond the emphasis of this essay, except as noted. In our experience, "stakeholder engagement" is commonly used as a colloquial catch-all for most such activities, though it is often used interchangeably with the other terms listed above.

For many academics writing about and practicing these various forms of public engagement, however, these terms are not necessarily interchangeable. They denote different value systems and approaches to conceptualizing the relationship between "they who engage" and "those being engaged." Take "stakeholder engagement," for instance: The concept was first introduced as a counterbalance to shareholder engagement in the business literature (Freeman, 2010) and although many in engineering and natural sciences prefer this term, others from the humanities and social sciences often reject it because of its roots in settler-colonialist historical practices and capitalist structures of ownership (Banerjee, 2003; Reed & Rudman, 2023). In fact, "engagement" as a term can be critically scrutinized; it implies that those doing the "engaging" (academics) have agency while those being "engaged" (publics) are in a passive role. For that reason, academics from fields such as communication, health sciences, and science and technology studies often prefer terms such as "public participation," "participatory action research," "partnerships," or "collaboration." We chose the term "public engagement" for this essay simply because it seemed to cast a wide enough net that it might capture a variety of the concepts and approaches listed here, while recognizing that this term will be adequate for some and too broad and ill-defined for others. In short, there is no one term everyone agrees on, and scholars have pointed out that the terminology used in various bodies of literature is often unclear (Deverka et al., 2012; Huxham et al., 2000; Stewart, 2009).

This diversity of terms can make finding and managing the "right" literature challenging. Both the academic and practitioner literatures vary widely across types of engagement. Searches for "stakeholder participation" (Luyet et al., 2012; Reed, 2008), "stakeholder engagement" (Leonidou et al., 2020; Talley et al., 2016), and "stakeholder collaboration" (Orr, 2013; Savage et al., 2010) all return works that, on the surface, seem to be concerned with similar questions, approaches, and critiques. However, replacing "stakeholder" with "community" returns yet another set of (seemingly) similar or overlapping literatures (cf. Ahmed & Palermo, 2010; Burns & Heywood, 2004; Heath & Frey, 2004). Replacing "community" with "public" or "citizen" returns even more results. Furthermore, many results vacillate between terms as if they were equivalent. Indeed, differing terms can often—though not always—point to the values and goals that different disciplines and practitioners bring to working with publics. Different terms may be intended to highlight particular relationships between those engaging and those being engaged, goals for engagement, and/or "best practices" for setting and achieving those goals.

In terms of goals, there are not universal standards for public engagement goal-setting, nor is there agreement about what constitutes effective engagement (e.g., Rowe & Frewer, 2000). Does effective engagement avoid conflict? Does it end with public support for a predetermined decision, or empower the public to define problems and develop solutions (Arnstein, 1969)? Is it deemed successful on normative criteria, objective-meeting criteria, or process criteria? A successful engagement can be directed toward achieving any of these goals, or none—for instance, sometimes engagement is about relationship-building, rather than seeking any sort of instrumental outcome. Quite often there is no stated goal at all—academics often embark on public engagement activities without ever defining an objective. On the other hand, practitioners in the public sector often have very specific goals they need to achieve, such as following public notification or meeting requirements, or getting feedback on proposed projects.

The diversity of engagement literatures can be a strength if one knows enough to navigate it. However, it can also be an obstacle if a familiar engagement is used across ill-fitting contexts, a situation captured by the adage "when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." As an example, one of us works across public land management in the American West, helping

to organize and facilitate collaborative efforts in environmental management, as "collaboration" is increasingly recommended in federal management strategies. The literature on collaboration as an engagement method focuses attention on relationship- and trust-building, long-term (often informal) processes, and coming to consensus (Innes & Booher, 2004; Van Riper, 2013), yet federal land management agencies cannot abdicate authority for land management decisions and struggle with relationship-building, as employee turnover is high and there is a tension between agency capture and building community trust (Kretser et al., 2018; Puntenney, 2022). In these cases, the engagement method (collaboration) is often ill-fitted to the institutional and political context (federal decision-making). The specific policy demands of "collaboration" guide interested parties to a literature that is ill-equipped for the context, whereas literature on engagement practices that center formal processes, broad public input, and consultation may be more appropriate. But how does someone unfamiliar with the domain navigate this?

In sum, domain complexity presents a real challenge to those first entering public engagement, teaching students public engagement theory or practices, or trying to understand how to support and reward public engagement work in university settings. We call attention to the intertwined complexity of the terms, values, and goals of the public engagement literature as a means of highlighting not just the challenges inherent to doing the work itself but the challenges of even preparing to do the work. As the domain develops and different forms of public engagement are utilized and reported across diverse contexts, we expect this complexity to increase and become even more difficult to navigate. The final section of this essay offers recommendations to help guide those interested in public engagement navigate this difficult terrain. First, however, we describe two more significant challenges facing public engagement practitioners today.

Challenge 2: Rapid Intensification and Hyperpolarization

Public engagement activities are almost never apolitical—engaging with publics means engaging with people embedded in social, economic, and political contexts. Some public engagement activities are deeply embedded in histories of struggle and protest; those working in environmental justice contexts come to mind, to give but one example among many (e.g., Jalbert & Kinchy, 2016; Ottinger, 2010). In other engagement activities, power relations are ill-considered or unbalanced. For example, there has been much work critically analyzing engagement projects that involve students and faculty "engaging" communities locally and abroad, perhaps with excellent intentions, but without developing meaningful partnerships, accountability mechanisms, or plans for long-term sustainability (e.g., Illich, 1968/1990; Lautensach & Lautensach, 2013). These are long-standing and relevant critiques worthy of our continued attention. Furthermore, there is an extensive literature documenting how those in power use public engagement pathways to organize quickly around their interests, such as corporate interest groups and lobbyists who routinely advocate for or against projects, rules, and legislation that might impact their business (Baumgartner et al., 2021; Golden, 1998) or to whitewash or greenwash corporate aims (e.g., Bsumek et al., 2014; Kovic et al., 2017). Thus, although expanded access to information and social networks facilitates community building and advocacy, it also risks elevating the perspectives and needs of the few, potentially producing a tyranny of the minority (Bishin, 2009). Such dynamics have long been in play.

By contrast, in this section, we are primarily talking about two more recent phenomena that are especially salient in the contemporary American context. The first is rapid intensification, which we largely attribute to the speed and intensity with which interest groups and publics can mobilize around particular issues and messages in ways that shortchange more deliberative engagement strategies. At its best, this allows publics to rapidly respond to developments that may not serve them. At its worst, rapid intensification can give rise to conspiratorial thinking and reactionary responses that are particularly shaped by political affiliation and worldview (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). The second is hyperpolarization. The two dimensions of hyperpolarization of interest to us, and which may shape engagement efforts at universities, are (1) political identifications, which seem to be increasingly salient for issues that formerly had not been particularly politicized; and (2) national political identifications and messaging,

which increasingly overlay what used to be nonpartisan, local politics. These processes are impacting multiple forms of public debate and discourse; here, we provide special attention to the challenges they pose to public engagement practices, drawing from examples in our own practice.

Rapid Intensification

"Rapid intensification" refers to the accelerated pace at which issues capture public attention and ignite debate, often leaving little room for reflection or adjustment. In this environment, the most alarming narratives frequently overshadow more measured perspectives, with misinformation and sensationalism amplifying the urgency of discussions. Social media and electronic communication technologies have revolutionized the spread of information, enabling publics to not only become aware of an issue but also adopt entrenched positions within hours or days. The speed of intensification creates significant challenges for public discourse, where practitioners must navigate preformed opinions and limited opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Moreover, individuals and organizations may face reputational risks for taking controversial stances—or for choosing not to engage at all.

Communication around issues and conflicts within communities once turned at a slower pace, set by daily news cycles, publication of letters to the editor, and the convening of public meetings. These means of disseminating facts and opinions not only moderated the pace at which information was shared, they involved gatekeepers who could assess the validity of information, enforce (sometimes exclusionary) norms of civility, and seek out diversity of perspectives (Iyengar, 1994; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). Social media has mediated some of this gatekeeping through expedited information sharing and the circumvention of gatekeepers, but information and mis- or disinformation are shared instantaneously and may metastasize while depth and context are flattened. Moreover, platform algorithms may promote especially alarmist or polarizing posts, as these successfully compete in overlapping attention and affective economies (Boler & Davis, 2020). As a result, conflicts can quickly become heated and trust can erode.

Helping publics to work through conflicts is a central aim of academics' public engagement work. Doing so successfully depends in part on the opportunity to enter conflicts at productive moments—for instance, when data and analysis from experts might be heard and evaluated, when stakeholders' positions are responsive to new information, and when members of the public can engage in basic norms of civil discourse (i.e., convening together, speaking and listening in an ordered fashion, etc.). Once conflicts have intensified, conventional engagement practices may not be effective and academic expertise may be unhelpful or unwelcome. Students may face particular challenges wading into such conflicts. Although they may be especially motivated to become involved in high-intensity issues, their developing maturity, judgment, and professionalism may not yet prepare them for these settings.

Rapid intensification of conflicts makes conventional forms of public engagement difficult or impossible for nearly any social issue. A recent proposal to relocate a local shelter and service center for people experiencing homelessness illustrates this phenomenon. A locally respected nonprofit operated a small shelter on the edge of the city's downtown for several years and sought a larger facility to serve the region's growing population of individuals and families experiencing homelessness. They identified a site further from the city center that appeared to have much to recommend it—for instance, the building's former use by another service-oriented nonprofit, and its location along a public transit corridor. But as is the case with many types of socially necessary but locally unwanted land uses, some area residents quickly mobilized against the effort. These residents felt that the shelter would compound challenges within their already disadvantaged neighborhood, or pointed to public safety concerns, often highlighting the recent murder of a local child by a man experiencing homelessness. Opposition mobilized seemingly overnight.

Among the strategies used to fight the shelter's move was an oppositional Facebook group dedicated to sharing information regarding public comment opportunities, details of the shelter relocation proposal, and arguably alarmist concerns regarding persons experiencing homelessness and implications of the shelter proposal. As is common in online forums, comments included some exchanges more personal and hostile than those typical of in-person public fora (though in-person spaces are becoming

similarly hostile—see Baker & Ivory, 2021; Smith, 2021), such as characterizing those with opposing views as ill-informed or unreasonable, or insulting and degrading those living with homelessness. Hostility regarding the shelter moved from online to "in real life" when a mural on the proposed shelter building's windows proclaiming "You Are Welcome" was defaced. In response, a local neighborhood association condemned this act, as did the oppositional Facebook group, though the latter continued to post alarmist content.

Development and use of these social media channels was not the only means by which locals organized in opposition to the proposed shelter. However, the norms of social media exchange allowed emotionally loaded and spurious claims to become central to debate over the issue. As a result, the conflict quickly became so charged that several of us stepped back from possible engagement opportunities. For instance, two of us considered and then rejected having students examine the shelter siting through an experiential learning course. Students, we worried, might not have the skills necessary to respond to the conflict's strong rhetoric and emotions, or to balance potentially competing roles as scholars, advocates, members of the community, and/or representatives of the university. Another of us was engaged by the city to facilitate a group charged with making a shelter-siting decision, but it became clear as the group's work proceeded that many members didn't feel safe or comfortable making a recommendation, given the intense neighborhood opposition. It is not likely that any process or facilitation could have intervened to overcome the intensification of the issue in the time provided by applicable policies and procedures. At the time of this writing, the shelter has been approved by the city and construction has begun, but relationships among neighbors, city employees and residents, and the unhoused have been deeply strained, and lawsuits continue to work their way through the courts.

Hyperpolarization

Hyperpolarization adds a significant challenge to public engagement by aligning local conflicts with broader ideological divides and national political narratives. This dynamic not only increases the likelihood of conflicts intensifying along partisan lines but also erodes trust in institutions and expertise. Heightened skepticism toward authority is often accompanied by growing hostility toward opposing political viewpoints, a phenomenon political scientists term "negative polarization" (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). These trends complicate engagement efforts, as participants may approach discussions with entrenched distrust or preconceptions shaped by political identity. For practitioners, navigating these dynamics requires finding ways to foster dialogue and trust amid deepening ideological divides.

"Polarization" broadly refers to the phenomenon of a social, policy, economic, or cultural issue becoming a source of or attached to partisan identity and conflict; two sides may come to seem as if they are at opposite "poles" in terms of beliefs, ideologies, policy preferences, geographical sorting, and so on (Heltzel & Laurin, 2021). Although most issues in our society have political aspects, by "polarization" we mean the process whereby an issue that was previously not contested becomes so in a way that is notably partisan. A good example of this process is the polarization around the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. It took many of us by surprise that a public health disaster could so quickly become partisan. We would hope instead for a rational, consistent, apolitical response focused on limiting infections and deaths and reopening schools and businesses as quickly and safely as possible. However, the COVID response was politicized early on by political actors and since then responses to the crisis (whether to have lockdowns, to wear a mask, or to get vaccinated) can be correlated with partisan identification (Lyons & May, 2021). As a result, it is likely more people have died than might have otherwise, that illness and death may have disproportionately affected Republicans as opposed to Democrats (Fowler et al., 2021), and possibly that the pandemic stretched on longer than it might have otherwise.

Polarization might appear most relevant to state and national politics, rather than local public engagement practices. Indeed, historically, partisan identities have been most salient at the federal and state levels. Municipal and school board elections, for example, have generally been considered nonpartisan. However, recent years have seen a rise in partisan identification manifesting at the local and hyperlocal (neighborhood-scale) levels. Local officials, even including those who were elected to nonpartisan positions, are painted with a partisan brush.

We can think of this phenomenon as a "flattening" of American politics, such that even local politics now have become associated with national political interests. Recent efforts to "take over" school boards and health districts offer useful examples of this flattening (Mazzei, 2021; Schneider, 2021).

Public participation projects that would have been challenging under past circumstances now feel particularly fraught because we are dealing with heightened levels of public mistrust of institutions and democratic processes and with the rise of what political scientists call "negative partisanship"—political identification not just with one's political party but explicitly against the opposing party (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2019). So, if an American identifies as a Republican, they are likely to do so now not because they identify with traditionally conservative ideals but instead because they despise the Democrats (and vice versa). However, this hyperpolarization does not necessarily apply only to political party identification; we are seeing an "us vs. them" mentality manifest across multiple contexts, exacerbated by mis- and disinformation that spreads especially quickly in social media environments and, more recently, by the isolation and conflicts created by the COVID pandemic.

It is a challenging time for a public engagement practitioner entering into a field where there is not only conflict but increasing polarization. Many of the "best practices" developed in public engagement literatures can seem ill-equipped to address the challenges of hyper- or negative polarization. One can spend a lot of time and effort building systems, processes, and relationships that can seemingly be undone overnight when state or national players intervene to upset the applecart, sometimes in bad faith, or when social media narratives oversimplify or spread misinformation that poisons the well. As the old saying goes, it takes a very long time to build trust and just a minute to destroy it. This adage feels especially true now.

A vignette from our own experience that involves another urban land use case in our area illustrates this challenge. Neighbors in a wealthy neighborhood who did not want a church to develop affordable housing on a nearby vacant block stated concern about impoverished people moving in. They claimed that affordable housing would lead to a decline in property values, overtaxed social services and schools, increased trash problems and drug use, and decreased maintenance of the space. Neighbors accused church leadership of making sweetheart deals with real estate developers and launched a series of lawsuits to impede development. Neighbors didn't trust the church or the city to protect their interests, or to engage in productive dialogue. The church, for its part, argued that it has a missional calling to provide housing and, at the end of the day, believes its private property rights dictate what it can do with the block. During a stakeholder characterization study, a participant told one of us that he was a "good liberal" who gave to housing charities, but that he didn't have to put up with his property values taking a hit. A church leader indicated that he would listen to the neighbors but at the end of the day the church could do what it wanted.

Nonetheless, the church and neighbors were set to embark on a facilitated restorative justice process when the pandemic hit. Seemingly in the blink of an eye, the stress and distance brought on by the pandemic caused a major rift between neighbors and their neighborhood association, which resulted in more than a year's worth of intense conflict over association elections and decision-making. A local newspaper called the conflict a "neighborhood divorce"—an apt characterization. But we see in that "divorce" a mirror image of the kinds of political splitting-up that Americans are experiencing writ large in the early 2020s.

Challenge 3: Institutional Logics

Institutional logics are the underlying norms, expectations, and policies that govern how universities are organized and operate. These logics encompass not only formal structures and procedures but also the ways in which universities, as organizations, are expected to act and interact with external stakeholders (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). In the context of public engagement, institutional logics often reflect a blend of academic and business cultures, shaping priorities, resource allocation, and the nature of partnerships. These intersecting logics can create tensions, such as balancing financial imperatives with community needs or aligning scholarly rigor with practical impact. As universities face evolving external pressures, such as funding challenges and societal demands, their institutional logics play a pivotal role in determining how ef-

fectively they engage with the public.

Universities' engagement efforts are fraught with contradiction. On one hand, universities are crucial centers of expertise. Not only are their faculties and staff subject matter experts, but many academics' scholarly contributions include community-engaged and community-based research, program and policy evaluation, and public outreach (Hoffman, 2021; Moore, 2014). However, the structures, logics, and reward systems of universities do not always encourage, and sometimes implicitly or explicitly discourage, engagement work (Fischer, 2023; Hoffman, 2021). This disconnect may persist even as universities of all types have come to emphasize public and community engagement as a way of indicating their value to taxpayers and other stakeholders and as a metric for assessing university performance (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). When successful, partnerships with publics stand to benefit scholars, universities, and their communities (Franz, 2005; McNall et al., 2009). But these efforts can also go awry, particularly when institutions' engagement efforts are primarily self-serving, performative, or short-lived (for the institution's benefit) rather than centering communities' needs and goals (Moore, 2014). In the worst cases, universities' engagement projects may be interpreted as unequal, unhelpful, or even exploitative (Glover & Silka, 2013; Karasik, 2020).

How do we reconcile universities' desires to respond to community needs and grand challenges with the banal realities we face as academics working within complex organizations? We address three practical concerns here: (1) the challenges of adapting engagement work to the academic calendar, (2) engagement's place within faculty assignment and reward structures, and (3) obstacles imposed by bureaucratic processes.

When it comes to engaging in community issues, timing is of utmost importance. University and community timescales are often out of sync—moving either too quickly or too slowly or, in the case of universities, fragmenting time into units such as semesters that do not reflect the rhythms of public issues. How can academics be responsive to immediate community needs or nurture long-term relationships and trust when our workload is thus divided (Baum, 2000)? And how can we sustain community relationships as academic responsibilities change, new courses are taught, student cohorts pass through, and so on? When including students in engagement work, how might we quickly and adequately train them in the practice and ethics of engagement and provide opportunities to apply this training through meaningful relationships and projects—all in one semester? In addition, university research doesn't often chase policy developments and certainly not on the short timescales in which issues arise within communities. As an example, the timeline for university researchers to access competitive external funding for academic research is generally 6 months or more. Even with the intention to be responsive to community needs, can most universities effectively respond?

Assignments and reward structures also present challenges. Academics themselves have many workload demands and expectations for achieving promotion and/or tenure (Hoffman, 2021). The demands are generally broken into teaching, research, and service, with each assigned varying weights across different departments, universities, and positions. The question of how public engagement "counts" is a challenging one for many institutions. Not only does this work straddle operational definitions of research, teaching, and service, it does not always result in publications or other easily recognized products. In addition, engaged research may not always be publishable in highly ranked journals, posing a challenge to conventional evaluation and tenure metrics. Those best positioned to evaluate the merits of engaged scholarship are often outside the positions and networks typically called upon to evaluate candidates. Even as universities increase their commitments to community engagement, promotion and tenure practices are slow to reflect this commitment, and institutional cultures may be even slower to change (Ellison & Eatman, 2008). Some faculty may not view engaged scholarship as "real" scholarship, and even when policies acknowledge community-engaged work, untenured faculty may wonder how it will count. Is it a helpful addition to an already robust record of conventional research, can it stand alone as scholarship, or is it an extra burden not worth pursuing?

Furthermore, university business and legal processes can hinder those inside the institution when it comes to outside engagement. The activities required to answer requests for proposals, negotiate contracts, develop data-sharing agreements, and earn Institutional Review Board approval can

all but halt the progress of some engaged scholarship. These activities can generate delays, and community members may not understand or value the rationales behind them. In addition, communication channels at the university are anything but clear. As a result, a community partnership built by a researcher may be impacted when others at the university directly engage the partner rather than working through the established relationship. Another set of challenges arises with research dissemination—who has control over it, how and when findings should be released, and by which party (Archer-Kuhn & Grant, 2014). In most cases, if the research is sponsored, the contract will outline the ownership of intellectual property created through the research. Dissemination itself can be used to both inspire new partnerships and advance community engagement scholarship.

A course cotaught by two of us illustrates challenges presented by institutional logics. The course was designed to facilitate student research as a resource to address housing crises in our region. First, as with any student-centered engagement work, substantial time and effort was required to cultivate students' knowledge in the field. We spent our first semester reading key sources on housing affordability and access, followed by another semester getting to know key community partners. Although we did not conduct research during this "getting up to speed" time, by the end of the first year, students identified the central needs of community partners. For instance, planners and local governments needed tools to effectively communicate with residents about proposed affordable housing projects. In our second year, we began working with a local "client" agency, assessing affordable housing needs and identifying housing strategies that might work in our region's policy and political context. Were the course not multisemester, and students not allowed to repeat it for credit, this work would not have been possible.

Along the way, we missed an opportunity to serve a community partner. This organization serves members of our region at risk of homelessness by preventing eviction, rapidly rehousing households, and serving as a coordinated point of entry for the area's homelessness services. They requested some data analysis to evaluate whether these services were being provided equitably to diverse households. The project fit well with the aims of our class, but barriers emerged as we tried to transfer the relevant data to the university for analysis.

The organization had recently implemented a new data-sharing policy, necessitating a data use agreement (DUA) between the outside agency managing the data and the university. The intent of a DUA is to specify how data will be shared, stored, disclosed, and used, among other things, and these agreements can be helpful in making explicit the understandings that guide collaborative projects. DUAs are often required when academic researchers utilize others' data and are required when using HIPAA-protected data (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights, 2013). They're also a source of frustration for faculty who view the DUA process as generating "excessive and unnecessary delay[s] in getting research started" (Mello et al., 2020, p. 150). It is not uncommon for a request for a DUA to enter a university's office of general counsel or similar entity and seem to disappear. In studying DUA delays, Mello et al. found they are rooted in the complexity of the agreements as well as "procedural inefficiencies, incomplete information, data suppliers' lack of incentives and familiarity with academic practices, and faculty unresponsiveness" (p. 150). In our case, the DUA approval took 3 months, which were spent nudging the multiple relevant offices about the request and helping direct it to the right desk and signatory.

Our goal here is not to complain about the slow wheels of university bureaucracy, but to illustrate how the pace and execution of these processes may confound engagement opportunities. As we waited for permission to get the project under way, spring semester ended, students interested in summer research opportunities looked elsewhere, and fall term began—by which time we had committed to an opportunity with a different partner. The delay was not unlike those experienced with other institutional processes such as IRB approval or contracting procedures that, although important for conducting ethical research, complying with state and institutional funding policies, and protecting the institution's interests more broadly, may be out of sync with the condensed calendars of semesters and with the desire of community partners to obtain assistance sooner rather than later.

Implications and Recommendations

The concerns we emphasize here—domain

complexity, rapid intensification and hyperpolarization, and institutional logics—overlap and intersect in important ways. For instance, complex and sensitive environments can change on a dime, as we saw with the neighborhood's conflict with the church. But such conflicts can also take many years to understand properly and to intervene in successfully. Such investments do not always align with academic calendars—the "timing" issue that routinely confounds university engagement efforts. Furthermore, many faculty perceive themselves to be apolitical, nonpartisan, or committed to objectivity. The thought that one could get caught in a social or political quagmire that does not yield satisfying results or could harm one's career certainly functions as a deterrent, especially if one is considering involving students, who could be dragged into ugly and even threatening environments if things deteriorate. Moreover, as public universities become a popular target of legislatures' political agendas, engaging with particularly hot issues may also bring about unwanted attention and fiscal repercussions.

However, with public trust in higher education waning (Fischer, 2022), there has never been a more important moment for academics to find ways to engage with publics. Students, staff, and faculty can make a positive impact through community partnerships, which may help rebuild lost trust. Across the country, institutions are creating or strengthening their outreach and engagement divisions. Organizations like the Engaged Scholarship Consortium, the Consortium of University Public Service Organizations, and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities provide frameworks, training, and camaraderie for community partnership development and engaged research. What we offer below is general guidance and principles to consider when engaging in community partnerships in relation to the issues identified above: domain complexity, rapid intensification and hyperpolarization, and institutional logics.

Domain Complexity Recommendations

Public engagement is complex, and always has been. The literature consists of a variety of confused terms, each with its own best practices and implicit assumptions. This complexity cannot be solved, but it can be recognized. Recognizing this complexity can help manage expectations around community engagement. For example, if an engagement effort is being conceptualized as a collaboration but is more like a stakeholder engagement, then the practices and values recommended in the collaboration literature will not fit well with the reality of the effort. This incongruity may seem trivial, but setting expectations can help guide conversations with administrators and public partners, and set realistic goals for deliverables and resource commitments.

At the very least, institutions should strive to support conversations on campus about goals and definitions. Ideally, such conversations will also involve community partners. They can also consider the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement, which provides structural suggestions for a community-engaged institution. In addition, institutions should provide research and training support to faculty and staff who are interested in doing public engagement work, and who may need support getting started. Institutions could support attendance at workshops and conferences, or the development of on-campus workshops, faculty learning communities, and learning circles. Finally, offices of community engagement—which are often focused on reporting on or catalyzing community engagement efforts—should also consider investing in institutional capacity to support faculty, staff, and students seeking to navigate these complex intellectual and practical challenges.

Rapid Intensification and Hyperpolarization Recommendations

Universities are increasingly at the center of many of the nation's culture wars; from an institutional perspective, public engagement work can be both a remedy for decreasing public trust in higher education, and a source of public conflict. University administrations are quick to celebrate successful public engagement activities in marketing and communication campaigns; they have been less intentional in providing support when conflicts or controversies arise.

This is a hard problem to navigate, but there are steps that can be taken. Faculty, staff, and student training for publicly engaged scholars can provide guidance for managing conflicts that quickly escalate or intensify. Universities should develop crisis response plans that communicate the kinds of support faculty and staff can expect and should seek out should things go awry. Finally, institutions can provide some training on how to engage with the media in order to prevent

or moderate any negative feedback loops. Mentoring and coaching, especially through learning communities and offices of community engagement, can help those new to engagement be aware of potential negative outcomes and have resources available when a situation arises. Good practices can be shared and successes celebrated. Such support can temper feelings of isolation or anxiety that occur in the face of engagement challenges. Faculty and staff should carefully consider whether, when, and how students or courses might retreat when course projects get into heated situations. Finally, national associations and organizations can work toward creating a set of recommendations or best practices for dealing with a strong threat of polarization and ossification.

Institutional Logics Recommendations

Universities have a clear interest in encouraging faculty, staff, and students to engage their communities. Further, institutions' stated support for these activities should be accompanied by investments in appropriately aligned reward and support structures. Examples include revising promotion and tenure policies to reward engaged scholarship and creating engaged faculty, staff, and administrative positions dedicated to this work. Research suggests that often this kind of work functions like emotional labor or an add-on to existing work, and can frequently fall disproportionately on women and people of color, who in turn may not be adequately rewarded for these efforts (Fischer, 2023). To address this problem, there must be good alignment between statements of support for engaged research and actual reward and administrative structures.

We would also encourage institutions to consider, at a high level, ways to reduce red tape and other kinds of bureaucratic friction that make the conduct of public engagement work so frustrating. Administrative transaction costs are a particularly challenging problem, especially at state institutions. Institutions should determine if community-engaged scholarship has values beyond monetary ones provided by partners with the capital to sponsor research activities or pay student interns and act accordingly. Overly conservative or constraining data agreements, risk management constraints, catering contracts, and software approvals are just some of the general administrative processes that become hurdles and sometimes barriers to this kind of work. Individual researchers can express agency by being upfront with community partners about these processes, and sometimes having the partner agency lead is a useful workaround, as is creating master agreements between community partners and institutions. Regardless of the solution(s), institutions must take on these issues at an organizational level.

Conclusion

We thus find ourselves in the paradoxical role of bringing to bear our own expertise on a field where expertise is itself a significant challenge. Many scholars are diligently working to shift academic cultures to be more amenable to and responsible for engagement activities (Boyer, 2015; Fry et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2021). This work is necessary and can help to structure academic–community relationships in ways more amenable to normatively, epistemically, and sociopolitically responsible engagement. However, in view of these emerging challenges, academics need to be reflexive about engagement and its implications. When is the issue moving faster than institutional constraints allow? Are we merely consulting or truly engaging? Are we aiming for participatory action research? Are we acting as a concerned public and not as an institutional representative? Where is the money coming from, who has the power, and how are money and power constructing the conditions of the engagement? What engagement frameworks—and assumptions that underlie them—are best suited for the context? And, critically, when are universities promoting public engagement as a depoliticization strategy aimed at performing engagement for social license rather than enacting it for democratic legitimacy?

And when do we not engage? As much promise as engagement offers, in light of the significant challenges we've discussed, nonengagement may at times be the more responsible and/or pragmatic choice. When are the conditions such that academic engagement is not effective? When are the relationships, communication norms, and sociopolitical landscapes already spoiled—when are they too hot to touch without risking further entrenchment and intractability? When is a client, partner, or participant just not going to work out? Acknowledging the cases that didn't happen—and, when appropriate, reporting out the lessons learned from them—is important. Yet, akin to the reticence to publish failed experiments, institutional

barriers exist. How do interrupted cases relate to a scholar's position within their institution in terms of tenure and social capital? How are practitioners recognized not only for excellence in the cases where engagement works, but also for the self-awareness and courage to walk away?

It is at this juncture that public engagement scholars, practitioners, students, and all those interested find themselves. Public engagement is complex, and always has been. The literature consists of a variety of confused terms, each with its own best practices and implicit assumptions. Power dynamics in social relationships shape the processes and outcomes of engagement, holding both promise for underserved publics and peril for increasingly polarized social issues. Rapidly evolving social systems replete with technological intensification and ever more complex social realities challenge the efficacy of democratic decision-making. And the increasing polarization of social issues erodes the trust, respect, and communication that are needed to simply work together to solve complex issues.

In sum, the obstacles, conflicts, and emerging concerns we've outlined cannot be overcome merely through a renegotiation of individual expertise or a shift in individual attitude. The structural constraints to engagement and, more broadly, democratic institutions are significant. Negotiating the obstacles presented here requires concerted effort to illuminate the ways that explicit policies and implicit norms structure and constrain the possibilities for engagement. Organizations have an important role to play: Universities that desire to advance engagement must do so in ways that respect publics and contexts and provide faculty, staff, and students the resources and structures they need to succeed at these efforts. The comportment of faculty, staff, and students is important, but so too is dedicated structural analysis and change. The value to be gained from collaborating with publics is worth the effort such changes will require.

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