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To go big, we have to go home: building foundations for the future of community-engaged and public-facing research in linguistics

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Abstract: In this article, we discuss various public-facing scholarly activities we have engaged in and how these initiatives have reached large audiences to widely spread messages about language and linguistic equity and inclusion. We provide guidance for how to launch, coordinate, and carry out public outreach initiatives and community-engaged research, how to navigate potential pitfalls and position these efforts for success, and how to demonstrate the direct value and relevance of the work. We also offer strategies and advice for other linguists engaging in public outreach endeavors, especially with regard to connecting community-engaged work with teaching and research for maximal impact within the scholarly ecosystem. Community-engaged research and public-facing initiatives are best conceptualized and undertaken in comprehensive, intentional, informed by, and planned in ways that align with best practices in the literature and integrated into the scholarly enterprise. We assert that public-facing work is critical to the relevance and impact of linguistics and higher education. Most importantly, public-facing work that makes insights from research relevant to the public can help advance the broader goal of education for social impact and the public good.

Keywords: community-engaged research; outreach; public engagement; scholarly communication; sociolinguistics

1 Introduction

During our careers, we have launched, led, and participated in numerous initiatives related to public engagement and scholarly communication in linguistics that have built connections, developed long-lasting partnerships, and spanned institutions and communities. Each of the authors views community-engaged and public-facing research as integral to our scholarly goals and identities as linguists working in academia. Throughout this paper, we build upon the observations and advice we gave in a plenary talk that we co-delivered at the LingComm 23 conference, “Communicating with the public about language” (Charity Hudley et al. 2023b). This conference is a testament to how contemporary linguistics has developed as a discipline to increasingly value and support research that provides broad value to the public, in the media, to language users, and to their communities (cf. Linguistic Society of America n.d.). We also expand our discussion of public-facing scholarly activities we have engaged in and how these initiatives have reached large audiences to widely spread messages about language and linguistic equity and inclusion.

Advancing equity and inclusion is increasingly recognized as being essential to academia, higher education, and society writ large; we believe that this goal is, and should be, seen as essential to the discipline of linguistics as well (Charity Hudley et al. 2020, 2024a, 2024b). Proceeding from this premise, we provide guidance for how to carry out public outreach initiatives and community-engaged research, navigate potential pitfalls and position these efforts for success, and demonstrate the direct value and relevance of the work. We also offer strategies and

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advice for other linguists engaging in public outreach endeavors, especially with regard to connecting community-engaged work with teaching and research for maximal impact within the scholarly ecosystem. Occasionally, we attribute specific points in this paper to one of the three authors, as it reflects their particular experience. For example, two of us are more senior scholars, while one is more junior; two of us are at public universities, while one is at a private institution; these and other variations in our professional backgrounds, as well as the personal backgrounds and positionalities we bring to our work (discussed in Section 2), sometimes lead to different experiences and observations. In the absence of specific attribution, general points made throughout this paper can be assumed to reflect the views of all three authors.

We assert that community-engaged research and public-facing initiatives must not be adjacent to or atomized from broad scholarly goals. Public outreach must be action-based, comprehensive, and holistic – and scholars undertaking this work should be proactive in their intention to benefit the public (Wolfram 2023). Public-facing work is specialized; it should be conceptualized and undertaken systematically, informed by best practices in the literature, and undertaken with careful planning in advance. It should also be integrated into the scholarly enterprise, including via teaching about community-engaged linguistic research at undergraduate and graduate levels, by valuing community-engaged scholarship in linguistics journals, and by recognizing community-engaged research in promotion and tenure guidelines and the merit review process at institutions. Above all, we believe that making insights from research relevant to the public in ways that can improve society is, and should be, a goal of education for social impact and the public good.

2 Our professional positionalities and journeys: a brief overview

In this section, we provide a brief overview of our journeys with public-facing scholarship in linguistics that also gives some context as to how our professional positionalities and the paths our academic careers have taken undergird our scholarship. Our professional positionalities are also, of course, shaped by our personal positionalities. As Aris establishes in her chapter, “Apolitical linguistics doesn’t exist, and it shouldn’t,” which appears in *Decolonizing Linguistics* (Charity Hudley et al. 2024a), who we are necessarily affects our scholarship, including in epistemological, theoretical, methodological, analytical, and applied areas. We refer readers to Aris’s chapter for an excellent overview of how linguists can help challenge the colonial frames of power in academia via political transparency, which includes stating our subject, research, and political positionality. We also refer readers to the prefaces of *Decolonizing Linguistics* and *Inclusion in Linguistics* (Charity Hudley et al. 2024a, 2024b), which provide accounts by Anne and Christine of our own positionality and intentionality for the work we do. In this section, we focus primarily on how our professional journeys have unfolded in ways that have enabled us to advance our goals of carrying out public-facing and community-engaged scholarship.

Anne began her public-facing work as a graduate student studying with William Labov at the University of Pennsylvania, following his (1982) model of linguistic debt incurred. She owed a tremendous debt to the Philadelphia Black community, who supported her research and experience as a Penn student. While Anne was at Penn, Bill Labov was selected as a member of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) panel, “Preventing reading difficulties in young children.” He connected Anne with psychologist and literacy expert Hollis Scarborough, who sought someone to work with her to investigate empirical relationships among African American language and reading, in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and Haskins Laboratories. Anne partnered with AFT on her dissertation research, which examined correlations for African American students across language, culture, and reading achievement. She also led workshops for AFT teachers and coaches, which helped her refine her dissertation work and subsequent related work in research articles.

Out of this work grew a partnership with AFT that has lasted for over 20 years. Over the past decade, Anne joined with Christine to lead professional development workshops for teachers at AFT conferences and create online materials and publications to support linguistic inclusion in education. In 2022, with two in-service K–12 educator colleagues, we codesigned and co-delivered three webinars for teachers, which are accessible online to all 1.7 million AFT members (Charity Hudley et al. 2023c). In 2022, we coauthored a corresponding invited article, “Lift every voice: Valuing Black language and culture in classrooms,” in the AFT journal *American Educator*,

which had a print run of a million copies and is also available online (Charity Hudley et al. 2022). In 2023, we wrote another invited article, “Supporting students who use African American English: How families can become strong advocates for their children,” for a parent and caregiver audience (Charity Hudley et al. 2023c).

In 2020, Anne presented with Duolingo at the 2020 DuoCon conference to spread the word about Black language and culture across the Black diaspora – a large-scale public initiative about language that was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic (Charity Hudley 2020; see also Blanco 2021; for other publicly engaged research during COVID-19, see Sneller 2022).

Multimedia resources

- “Crafting linguistic autobiographies to build cultural knowledge” (<https://sharemylesson.com/webinars/linguistic-autobiographies>)
- “Affirming students through a language and literacy equity audit” (<https://sharemylesson.com/webinars/language-and-literacy-equity>)
- “The sound of inclusion: Using poetry to teach language variation” (<https://sharemylesson.com/webinars/inclusion-poetry-language>)
- “Lift every voice: Valuing Black language and culture in classrooms” (https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/charityhudley_mallinson_samuels_bigelow)
- “Supporting students who use African American English: How families can become strong advocates for their children” (https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/charityhudley_mallinson_samuels_bigelow)
- “Black languages matter: DuoCon 2020” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5xzlGHqv7w>)

Christine developed much of her passion for public-facing scholarship in graduate school at North Carolina State University, working with Walt Wolfram, a pioneer of linguistic outreach and engagement (Wolfram 1998, 2023). The mission-driven nature of public linguistic work resonated with her as someone from the US South, where language pride, as well as linguistic prejudice, often runs strong. She was a research assistant on numerous public-facing projects developed by the Language and Life Project at NC State, including the documentary films *Voices of North Carolina* and *Mountain Talk*. In conjunction with her dissertation research, Christine and then-student colleague Becky Childs were also awarded a North Carolina Humanities Council community engagement grant that supported the design and production of free booklets and CDs provided to the community and libraries across the state that featured the voices of community members in western North Carolina.

After beginning a tenure track job at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), Christine sought to expand her public-facing linguistic work to Baltimore, a city where residents also highly value local language and culture. Via service learning and project-based learning classes, Mallinson has engaged undergraduate and graduate students in publicly engaged scholarly activities centered on linguistic equity and inclusion (Mallinson 2018). Podcast episodes about language in and around the Baltimore area, a short student-produced film about linguistic diversity at UMBC, photos from a Baltimore museum exhibit about language, and more are available on her website, *Language in Baltimore* (<https://baltimorelanguage.com>). She has also done local public talks and provided consulting services to other professional groups, including judges, lawyers, clinical psychologists, and social workers, to connect the relevance of language to these important societal domains.

Multimedia resources

- *Language in Baltimore* website (<https://baltimorelanguage.com>)
- *Voices of UMBC* short film (<https://baltimorelanguage.com/voices-of-umbc/>)

Aris began her career as a nonprofit director for after-school-based programming. After moving into K–12 education and working in bilingual and monolingual programs, Aris saw the need for research-based support of linguistically marginalized student populations (Charity Hudley 2023; Rosa and Flores 2021). Her dedication to providing support for these students has guided her passion for disseminating linguistic information to practitioners, including speech-language pathologists, K–12 educators, and policymakers (Charity Hudley et al. 2023a; Clemons and Lawrence 2020). As an academic, Aris focuses on entering into the spaces of professional language- and education-related organizations (such as TESOL, NCTE, AERA, and AAAL) and joining in on podcasts, to talk to populations of teacher trainers, teachers, and students who are building their own ideas about how we should be structuring classrooms conversations about student-produced language across a variety of contexts.

Aris's overarching goal as a linguist is to combat harmful ideologies about differing ways of languaging. Centering this goal guides her participation in running public-facing workshops for US K–12 teachers, workshops and professional development for teacher trainees in schools of education, strategic planning sessions with speech-language pathologists (in US and UK contexts), public speaking engagements on podcasts, and blog posts for large-scale language websites such as Duolingo. Throughout these efforts, she works to ensure that what she is producing can be easily accessed by those who need it most.

As an example of how to create publicly available scholarship, Aris shares the creation of an open-access Spanish curriculum for Black students (Baralt et al. 2022), funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the US Department of Education. The curriculum, developed alongside experts in task-based language education and world language education, celebrates Blackness in Latin America and is centered around engaging, authentic tasks that are based on students' lives and interests. The curriculum consists of a series of units that incorporate real-world tasks, such as ordering food at a restaurant or going to a Black beauty salon or barber, as well as grammar and vocabulary instruction. Every unit features videos by Black community leaders who share about their successful Spanish language-learning journeys. The tasks are designed to be communicative and interactive, allowing students to practice their language skills in a meaningful context. The curriculum also emphasizes the development of cultural competence, with a focus on Blackness in the Americas and the Spanish-speaking world.

Multimedia resources

- “Towards an expansive Blackness,” *Critical Conversations* podcast, season 2, episode 1, January 2022 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1moictmTgE&t=841s>)
- “Big Tent (live with Aris Clemons, Caitlin Green, Rikker Dockum, and friends),” *Because Language* podcast, episode 77 (<https://becauselanguage.com/77-big-tent/>)
- “Task-based Spanish language curriculum for Black language learners: An open-access resource for teachers” (<https://laccmibridge.fiu.edu/editors-toolkit/tasks-lesson-plans-and-materials/>)

Community-facing public scholarship has not only been a satisfying professional endeavor for us; it has also been personally rewarding. One major aspect that we appreciate about public-facing work is the size of interactions and the impact that can be achieved. Initiatives such as Anne and Christine's recent webinars and articles with the AFT, Anne's talk at DuoCon, and Aris's podcast episodes have reached audiences that number in the millions. We each have also appreciated that public-facing work provides platforms where individuals can share their community language pride. We are grateful for the audiences and communities that have engaged with us in our public-facing work and for the personal fulfillment these experiences have provided.

3 Advice and strategies

As the three of us reflect on our experiences, we acknowledge that the advice and strategies we provide in this paper are informed by our own experiences and academic journeys (discussed in Section 2). Some of our advice may be generalizable whereas some may be particular to our rank, type of department, type of institution, and subfield of linguistics. We encourage readers to consult work by other linguists who are engaged in related scholarship but are proceeding from different personal and professional perspectives. Chapters in *Decolonizing Linguistics* and *Inclusion in Linguistics* (Charity Hudley et al. 2024a, 2024b) provide examples of action-oriented scholarship from scholars in different fields, departments, institutions, and countries; some of these include Plackowski (2024) on teaching about language and social justice in high school; de Cuba et al. (2024) on doing language activism at community colleges; Bown and Dockum (2024) on decolonizing the curriculum in historical linguistics at elite Predominantly White Institutions; Gibson et al. (2024) on methods for decolonizing research in syntax; Punnoose and Haneefa (2024) on reenvisioning a more inclusive linguistics in India; plus many more.

Opportunities for wide-reaching, mission-driven, public-facing scholarly communication, engagement, and impact are greater than ever before and are increasingly open to scholars across rank and institution. We discuss strategies and offer advice to inspire other linguists to launch and scale up their own outreach endeavors, including connecting with scholars and practitioners in other disciplines, aligning linguistic information to the priorities of non-academic communities, and integrating public outreach into teaching and research for maximal impact within the scholarly ecosystem.

3.1 The ethics of publicly engaged linguistic scholarship

Linguists must be honest with ourselves about who our public-facing work is for and who benefits from it. What is the impact of our scholarship for ourselves as professionals, compared to or in relation to the impact of our work for the people and communities with whom we are working? Aris observes that when linguists do public-facing work, we are stewards of other people's cultural and linguistic knowledge. Especially for linguists who are carrying out work with cultural or linguistic communities that you do not belong to, it is critical to ensure that their insights and priorities are integrated into your work, that the people and communities with whom you are working are compensated for their participation in your work, and that they have input into how they are represented in the materials that develop from this research. Considering in advance how to ethically engage with those who are contributing what we then take as linguistic data is a question that each of us has written about in our work (Charity Hudley 2017; Clemons 2024; Mallinson forthcoming).

We further note that we must recognize the privilege inherent in doing research. We believe that linguists, who build careers on other people's language, must use our institutional power and stature to sustain linguistic and cultural diversity and advance inclusion, justice, and equity (see also Charity Hudley et al. 2024a, 2024b). If carried out thoughtfully, ethically, responsibly, and in partnership, such work can also benefit language users and their communities. The fact, however, that public-facing scholarship always benefits the scholar is an omnipresent power dynamic that we must all be mindful of and address as we engage in this type of work.

3.2 Building partnerships from a foundation of intentionality and authenticity

Before launching a project and continuing through its duration, linguists must understand and remain mindful of which audiences we are aiming to communicate with. We suggest that researchers have an audience in mind in the initial design and conceptualization of the work, so that your public-facing scholarship is tangible and usable for specific audiences and in specific contexts. For social impact, our ideas must be relevant and useful.

Effective and authentic partnerships are necessary in public-facing work. Linguists, whether individual or teams, can only go so far by working solo or from one vantage point. You should think about who you can partner with and how to incorporate their insights, messages, and feedback to effectively communicate with larger audiences. For example, in their public-facing initiatives with the AFT, Anne and Christine partnered with two in-service teachers who they had worked with previously for many years – one of whom had been a former student of Anne's years before, and one of whom was an active AFT coach – to ensure that all content being shared and all materials being developed were as relevant as possible to educators who are teaching and working with students in classrooms and schools.

Identifying a specific audience, intentionally understanding and foregrounding their needs and priorities in advance, and forming partnerships to work together will, and should, shape the resulting design, process, and sharing of the public-facing work. In another example, Anne and Christine's current NSF-funded collaborative research award is supporting the formation of a research network of Black junior and mid-career faculty in linguistics and related fields. Aris is part of this network, and faculty who are connected through it have built upon these partnerships to develop new and advance existing collaborative research projects. This model foregrounds questions such as: what are the needs of this audience, and who can benefit in linguistics and academia beyond this group? From a community-engaged scholarly lens that prioritizes the needs of the

audiences, it is only valuable to carry out work that is designed in partnership and with intentionality.

Multimedia resource

- “Intentionality in research through public scholarship: An interview with Anne Charity Hudley” (<https://publicscholarship.stanford.edu/intentionality-research-through-public-scholarship-interview-anne-charity-hudley>)

3.3 Engaging on social media

Linguists doing publicly engaged work must think carefully about how to communicate: who are you talking to, what framing will appeal to your audience, and how can you tailor your message to this group? Aris reminds us that not everybody is blessed to have the training that linguists have; she shares with us that every time she writes a scholarly product, she writes it for her mother and thinks about how she would understand this as someone with a high school-level education. In her work, she emphasizes the importance of understanding and planning for the reality that not everyone has the time to read all of our carefully crafted articles. Instead, she insists that we have to make our information specific and accessible in forms that people who read it can use to share it with their colleagues and leaders. Material originally written for academic audiences can also be recrafted and rewritten for public audiences as op-eds, policy briefs, online articles about research for venues such as *The Conversation*, or books written for public audiences.

There are different strategies for utilizing and interacting with different types of media, and many excellent resources have been published on linguists working with the media (Bender 2020; Carter 2018; Linguistic Society of America n.d.). Choice of social media is also a consideration; as Aris points out, for example, one benefit of media such as YouTube is the ability to polish and edit before uploading. You need to ask yourself, how much do you want to share online? How, and how much, should you protect your identity or ability for other users to contact you? Aris reflects that she often thinks about how much she wants to engage online, including how much she wants people to be able to identify her versus identify her work. For example, this question affects whether she chooses to post on Instagram or TikTok, where she would have to be physically facing, versus on Twitter, where her posts can endorse a view with just words.

In communicating with other audiences, we also need to remember times when we ourselves didn't know something that others were aiming to teach us. As Aris points out, how would we have liked somebody to tell us this information? How can we make sure that we're communicating effectively and helpfully? Christine emphasizes that linguists must take care not to disparage public groups or community members for their beliefs or opinions about language, no matter how limited or incorrect we may perceive them to be. This golden rule is particularly important when communicating on social media. Posting online about incorrect things that the public believes about language allows linguists to feel superior for our insights, but doing so comes across as self-righteous – which can hinder others from understanding the messages we are trying to communicate and damage professional relationships and partnerships.

Scholars ought to consider our goals when using social media to communicate academic content. It is one thing to post a hot take or share a personal opinion on social media but, as Anne observes in line with her humanistic principles, it is important never to be cruel or mean just to cause attention. Christine echoes that how we operate on social media is, and should be, a reflection of our values. If we view ourselves as educators, a mission to educate with kindness and patience should guide how we work with the public, just as when we work with students. Thinking about our public persona in the same way that we think about our teaching persona can help guide how we want to operate as a scholar online.

Finally, we mention some strategies that can be taken in advance to help protect scholars who are active on social media. One strategy is to run a draft of material by others to gather reactions or feedback for edits before posting. Additional strategies involve reaching out to one's institution. Aris suggests that scholars who are planning to be engaged heavily in this type of work can take steps via their institutions such as: asking that your information be made private so that you don't get doxxed; asking your communications office if they have a plan

for situations that threaten a scholar's safety; and asking if there are institutional social media guidelines that you should follow. She further recommends that it can be helpful to talk to other people (including any lawyer friends you may have) about what protections you have in terms of free speech – including what are actual legal protections exist and what things are not actually protected at your institution, in your state, and in your country – so that you can make decisions accordingly. For students, your adviser is always a resource; career services and communication services (whether at your current institution or at an alma mater) may also be available to advise on establishing a social media presence and provide recommendations for dealing with any challenges that may arise.

3.4 Integrate this work into your teaching and research

One argument commonly marshaled against scholars spending “too much” time on public-facing scholarship is that it is not valued by tenure and promotion committees and doesn't “count” with regard to established publication criteria. Yet, institutional guidance and expectations surrounding research are changing (Ellison and Eatman 2008). We, therefore, assert that continuing to overemphasize caution about public-facing scholarship diverts attention from conversations about how and why this type of work is critical for inclusive and equitable research. Why do departmental policies reward publishing in some venues over others? Why are only certain venues considered acceptable publication outlets? How and why do editors decide to publish some types of work and not others? We need people who value public scholarship to stay in the academy.

We suggest finding the audiences and outlets that welcome public scholarship and engaging with them early in your career (see, e.g., Campus Compact 2021). In your area of research, what are the academic spaces and communities – including the universities, departments, mentors, conferences, journals, and funding agencies – that value this type of work and view it as mission-driven? Anne observes that such work does not have to be adjacent or peripheral but can instead be central to your scholarship. Early in her career, she looked for universities that signaled they valued community-engaged work, such as by showing interest in her courses on community-based research methods and scholarly communication. Christine similarly reflects that she is lucky to have found an institutional home at UMBC, a Carnegie-classified community-engaged institution that demonstrates its commitment through, for example, tenure and promotion guidance that values community-engaged work.

It can be fruitful to discuss with your chair and dean that engaged scholarship is a priority for your scholarship and to join forces with others at your institution who are seeking to make existing policies more inclusive of public-facing work. In doing this, you can provide examples of other successful scholars in your discipline and at your institution, so that you and your chair or dean can work from specific models. Aris points out the importance of discussing her commitment to public-facing work as early as during the hiring process, where she made sure to speak with her institution about community-engaged work being a central part of who she is as a scholar. Doing so made this kind of work legible and helped those who may have only seen one kind of scholarship understand community-engaged work as another viable and important path toward a long-lasting career. It also helped the institution become invested in her work, not only by acknowledging it as important but by hiring her and supporting her as a scholar embarking on an academic career at her institution.

One tip for early career scholars is to look at the CVs of other faculty and scholars who are doing public-facing work and see how they have integrated it into their teaching and research to meet the expectations of academic jobs. For example, Christine included public scholarship in graduate-level seminars and presented and published about the process and results in pedagogy-oriented venues (Mallinson et al. 2013; Mallinson 2018); similarly, Christine and Anne led workshops with dozens of K–12 teachers as part of a project supported by an NSF grant and published papers about the professional development model (Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2017; Mallinson and Charity Hudley 2014, 2018). Christine reminds scholars who are beginning to engage in public scholarship that funding is increasingly available to support this kind of work. Smaller internal grants can build momentum toward larger grants that are often highly valued by institutions.

With the rise of open access policies and, at many institutions, funding to support open access, Aris further notes that ensuring our work is made open access can help our scholarship reach the public. At the same time, we acknowledge that the costs of producing open-access scholarship can be a barrier. As Villarreal and Collister (2024) observe, “these institutional costs are not trivial [and] are more likely to be borne by already-privileged institutions.” (For more on open access in linguistics, see Berez-Kroeker et al. 2022.).

Anne’s vision for public scholarship is also centered on accessibility and equity, which is reflected in how time, money, and resources are valued. Ways to ensure this work is made more open and more accessible for more people can include involving undergraduate and graduate students in research projects, which ensures they experience research as coauthors on a team. Another model that Anne has used successfully is in her graduate seminar Scholarly Communication, which helps students understand the public scholarly dissemination landscape. The first half of the course focuses on publication, including writing books and journal articles, as well as giving research talks, job talks, and media interviews. The second half focuses on reviewing, editing, and the politics and economics of academic publishing. Students create a scholarly communication plan and prepare specific work for public communication. Such models help ensure that the next generation of scholars have learned how to do public-facing research and understand the principles, practices, and processes of public scholarship.

Multimedia resource

- Scholarly Communication seminar syllabus, taught by Anne Charity Hudley (2022)

4 Conclusions

We see linguistics as entering the next era of public scholarship. Many scholars in the discipline have embraced the need for engaged research and its impact on the public, but the next step is to realize a larger vision for the discipline to achieve greater relevance and impact in practice and policy. Simply sharing information about language is not sufficient; it must be made relevant to be widely understood. Linguists do not have to reinvent the wheel with methods of public communication, however: we can look outside linguistics to anthropology, communications, education, English, speech and hearing sciences, and other adjacent disciplines and fields for inspiration, models, and frameworks for sharing scholarly knowledge for public impact (see, e.g., Hamilton 2020). Conferences, guides, materials, and other resources compiled by leading organizations from these fields can demonstrate additional pathways for linguists to communicate with public groups in ways that apply research findings for real-world impact.

As we close this paper, we invite readers to take the next step of planning for how your work will aim for broad social and public impact. What are your goals and how can you start working toward those now? Who is the next partner you can engage with? What resources are available to guide you? What models can you draw upon to ensure that the work is counted as scholarship? We see public-facing work as critical to the relevance and impact of linguistics and higher education, and we look forward to the field and the profession continuing to evolve even further and more comprehensively in this direction.

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