

# ***Socialization in the Institution: A Working Group's Journey to Bring Public Engagement Into Focus on Campus***

Lia Plakans, Rebecca Alper, Carolyn Colvin, Mary Aquilino, Linda J. Louko, Patricia Zebrowski, and Saba Rasheed Ali

## **Abstract**

For over 3 years, 6 faculty members and 1 graduate student have gathered as a working group applying an interdisciplinary focus to public engagement projects involving immigrant families in the rural Midwest. One dimension of the group's effort has been to involve faculty, staff, and students from many disciplines in its examination of pertinent issues related to engaged scholarship. To support this goal of socialization in the institution, the interdisciplinary group hosted a 1-day workshop to explore engaged scholarship at the university. Through a survey and targeted interviews, working definitions for engagement and prospective areas of interest were explored during and after the workshop.

## **Introduction**

A next step in building support for the institutionalization of community engagement is a deeper understanding of successful faculty integration of research, teaching, and service in community contexts in different disciplinary and institutional arenas, and to learn more about the structures supporting such work. (*Moore & Ward, 2010, p. 45*)

**P**ublic engagement in higher education faces the challenge of generating interest among faculty, students, and administrators while simultaneously providing guidance for this compelling yet complicated work that brings campus and community partners together. Research investigating public engagement has identified faculty support and socialization as critical for sustaining such work (*Childers et al., 2002; Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012; Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & O'Meara, 2008*). With this goal in mind, six faculty members and one graduate student at a public, research-intensive university came together as a working group to focus on campus–community projects involving immigrant families in the rural Midwest. The group's mission has evolved over the years to include socialization for public engagement in the institution. To support this goal, we organized a 1-day workshop to build aware-

ness and encourage exploration of public engagement at the university. The purpose of this article is to describe the group's journey through this process, including reflection on responses from our university community about the workshop. Our hope is to motivate and guide the efforts of groups on other campuses to generate interest and provide socialization opportunities for public engagement.

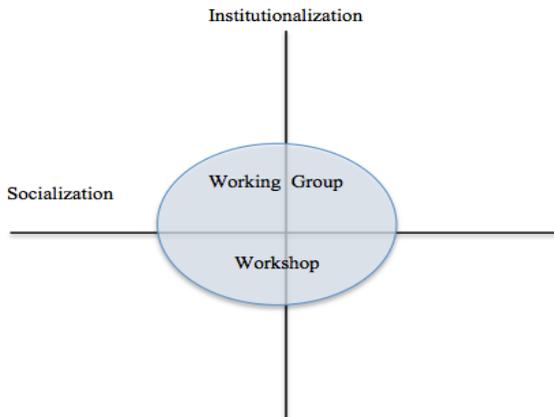
## **Socialization of Public Engagement in Higher Education Institutions**

Many universities and institutions of higher learning have been working to foster campus environments where public engagement is respected and expected. However, the path to inculcating such an approach across research, teaching, and service is not transparent, nor is there a static template for easy adoption. Sandmann et al. (2008) described aspects of universities' work in supporting publicly engaged scholarship. They identified *first-order changes* that institutions routinely make to promote the practice of engaged scholarship, which include creating mission statements, establishing an office for engagement, and developing funding opportunities for faculty; however, they posited that *second-order changes* are decidedly more difficult and opaque and need more attention, as they are more likely to enact change in institutional culture through "reconceptualization or transformation of organizational purposes, roles, rules, relationships, and responsibilities" (p. 50). Dividing campuses in a similar manner, Kecskes and Foster (2013) referred to engaged scholarship integration in higher education as involving *contextual intervention*, which is specific and local, perhaps reflecting the actions of individual faculty. It precedes *structural intervention*, which "fundamentally alters" (p. 9) an institution toward public engagement.

A critical aspect of contextual intervention or second-order changes is socialization. The term *socialization* is used regularly in social sciences such as education and anthropology to describe learning or acquisition related to roles in society. Experiences are drawn on, both formally and informally, to develop beliefs, expectations, and practices. At universities and colleges, we are socialized as faculty, staff, or students for the roles we play at our institution.

In an integrated model for advancing the scholarship of engagement, Sandmann et al. (2008) positioned socialization and institutionalization as intersecting axes (see Figure 1). They

described socialization of engaged scholarship as the preparation of faculty, which recognizes “the need to strengthen the pipeline for engaged scholarship or training of doctoral students with knowledge, skills, and orientation for this work” (p. 57). The other axis, institutionalization, reflects how “multiple components of an institution are addressed simultaneously and change processes are guided by an intentional change strategy” (p. 59). This axis is based on large-scale change, but it may include activities that contribute to the shift such as faculty support, rewards, or promotion procedures that are coordinated by an institution to commit to or secure the place of public engagement in its mission. The intersection of these two axes—socialization and institutionalization—is where our working group and the workshop described in this article are situated.



*Figure 1.* Socialization and institutionalization axes of a model for advancing engaged scholarship. Adapted from “An Integrated Model for Advancing the Scholarship of Engagement: Creating Homes for the Engaged Scholar” by L. Sandmann, J. Saltmarsh, and K. O’Meara, 2008, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 12(1), p. 56.

Other scholars have highlighted the fundamental role played by faculty groups to support public engagement pursuits. For example, Childers et al. (2002) argued that in order to create a culture of engagement, universities must foster “learning communities that support the organizational culture and institutional change” (p. 20). Franz et al. (2012) conducted a study of faculty focus groups along with a document review to explore the culture of engagement on a university campus. A major finding from their study was that a campus model encouraging engagement should facilitate

“opportunities for faculty to meet and discuss engagement” (p. 37). As an example of this, Childers et al. (2002) facilitated a conference that brought together 254 participants across three universities to discuss learning, discovery, and engagement. They conducted a needs analysis and an on-site evaluation for the event. Respondents reported that the most important themes for campuses to address were faculty issues, outreach culture, funding sources, technology, and developing competencies; they wanted more time for informal sharing. In response, the organization created an online learning community to promote sustained dialogue. Both of these studies point to the benefit and value of university groups formed for the explicit purposes of sharing, socialization, and conversations about publicly engaged scholarship. Such contextual intervention or second-order changes can occur parallel to or as motivation for first-order or structural intervention catalyzing the intersection of socialization and institutionalization. Our working group sought to incorporate these elements in a campus workshop on public engagement.

### **Our Working Group: Socialization on Campus**

To initiate our group, one member brought together faculty that she knew were committed to work involving community partnerships with school-aged children and their families in rural areas of our state. We applied for and received funding and convenient meeting space from a university center that encourages cross-disciplinary collaborations.

As our group began to explore issues of public engagement, it became apparent that we needed to establish a common working definition of publicly engaged scholarship. Having a shared understanding of this term was necessary to guide our work, prioritize activities, and direct our socialization efforts. Our group discussed and established the following working definition of public engagement to ground our work:

Based on the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, we define public engagement as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, and global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.” (cited by Driscoll, 2008, p. 39)

This definition is also guided by a belief that we should strive for four foundational characteristics of publicly engaged work: that it (1) is scholarly; (2) cuts across the missions of teaching, research, and service; (3) is motivated by reciprocity and mutual benefit; and (4) embraces the processes and values of civil democracy (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012, p. 13). The definition of public engagement reemerged when evaluating our workshop's impact, leading to an important direction for our future work as described later in this article.

During our initial working group meetings, we discussed the successes and challenges of our publicly engaged projects. Specifically, we were interested to hear how each of us engaged with community members where we worked, the difficulties we faced in sustainability and funding, and the attitudes of departmental and collegiate colleagues and administrators toward faculty public engagement. We also spent time reading about and discussing the experiences of immigrant families in rural communities. We chose *Immigrants Raising Citizens: Undocumented Parents and Their Young Children* (Yoshikawa, 2011) as the first book to read together. Next, pairs of group members read a selected book to share with the larger group (selected works included Maharidge, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2010; and Valdés, 1996). In addition, we invited campus administrators who might be willing to sponsor and extend our work; in these meetings, we explained our projects and discussed concerns about support for public engagement on our campus. By considering answers to questions they posed to us, we deepened our awareness of the institutional side of public engagement, which motivated us to continue to read and talk.

Through these working group meetings and related interactions with invited faculty and administrators, we recognized that our questions about public engagement on campus were not unique to our group. This realization led us to organize a campuswide workshop with the specific purpose of providing a place to share publicly engaged service/scholarship with colleagues and to delve into its unique opportunities and challenges. The workshop sought to extend the socialization from our smaller group to a wider audience of interested colleagues and also to connect our socialization efforts to the institution.

## **The Workshop**

To create a forum for faculty, staff, and graduate students across campus to exhibit, promote, and discuss public engagement, we

planned a 1-day workshop open to the entire campus at no cost to participants. Our working group had received funding and administrative support for the event from the Obermann Center, a site devoted to interdisciplinary collaboration. Additional funding came from the University Office of the Provost, the University Center for Teaching, and the Office of the Vice President for Research and Economic Development.

One month prior to the workshop, the following announcement of the event went out to faculty, staff, and graduate students in e-mail from the offices of the Provost, the VP for student life and the VP for human resources:

Please plan to join faculty, staff, and graduate students for a workshop to learn about *Public Engagement in Higher Education*. Come to hear more about the ways universities and their faculty, staff, and students are recommitting themselves to their public missions and creating better futures for their local and global communities. The workshop will be held on April 26th from 8:30-1:30 p.m.

To our surprise and delight, 118 students, staff, and faculty preregistered for the 6-hour workshop, and others registered on-site to join the workshop for parts of the day, making a total of about 200 attendees. The diverse group of participants represented all colleges in the university and a cross-section of departments. Attendees included faculty, staff, graduate students, and community members.

The day began with registration and casual conversation followed by opening remarks articulating the essence of our mission in offering this workshop. We expressed the hope that the workshop would

be the beginning of new relationships and ideas to increase the visibility and effectiveness of the public engagement that is already occurring on our campus and to strengthen our commitment to growing a culture that can sustain these efforts and promote new conversations in our academic community.

Each participant received a workshop packet containing pertinent readings, a description of the working group members, and a copy of the workshop agenda. In addition, we created a website to share resources both before and after the workshop.

Although the attendees and program reflected the socialization aspect of the working group, institutional agents were decidedly present. The president of the university opened with a welcome stressing the importance of publicly engaged faculty, staff, and students and assured participants of the university's strong commitment to public engagement. She urged attendees to be challenged by the day's conversation and affirmed that our campus is experiencing "a wonderful new energy for more publicly engaged teaching and research as well as a growing commitment to service to the people of our community, our state, and our society at large."

Also representing institutional support, the provost concluded the general session by highlighting institutional activities. He stressed that "we need to recognize, promote and advance these areas of the university," describing efforts to secure the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and a university grant award for projects to better the future of the state as illustrations of the university's commitment to public engagement. He finished by announcing the establishment of the new Office for Outreach and Engagement and the naming of an associate provost for this office.

The keynote address was delivered by a professor and head of the School of Urban and Regional Planning (URP), who described a project that pairs graduate students and faculty with urban communities to tackle development projects. Next was a moderated panel titled "A Cross-Campus Focus on Public Engagement." Panelists from departments across campus, including education, theater arts, computer science, engineering, and public health, discussed the ways they weave public engagement into their teaching, research, and service.

After this panel, participants attended a moderated breakout session on a topic they chose from the following: students' experiences with public engagement, designing assessment for publicly engaged scholarly work, getting started with public engagement, public engagement and the matters of promotion and tenure, or service-learning with business partners.

At a working lunch session, experts with experience in engaged teaching, research, or service joined attendees at round tables to moderate an "ask an expert" discussion and field questions. Topics included public engagement in prisons, archives and public engagement, issues of health and education in rural settings, sustainability and the environment, the arts and public engagement, community empowerment at the homeless shelter, and school readiness. The

workshop ended with a recap of the day and a query regarding interest in future workshops.

## Summarizing: Intersections of Socialization and Institutionalization

Through our working group meetings and the public engagement workshop, our group enacted practices supportive of socialization at our institution, perhaps along the lines of contextual intervention (Kecskes & Foster, 2013). Concurrently, structural-level activities were initiated to elevate public engagement at our institution. With the initial announcement at our workshop, the Office of Outreach and Engagement was established on campus. It has formalized initiatives to encourage public engagement, such as creating a valuable interactive website, delivering several community impact grants, and compiling a database of community partners and projects. With strong support from this office, the university applied for and received a Carnegie Community Engagement Classification.

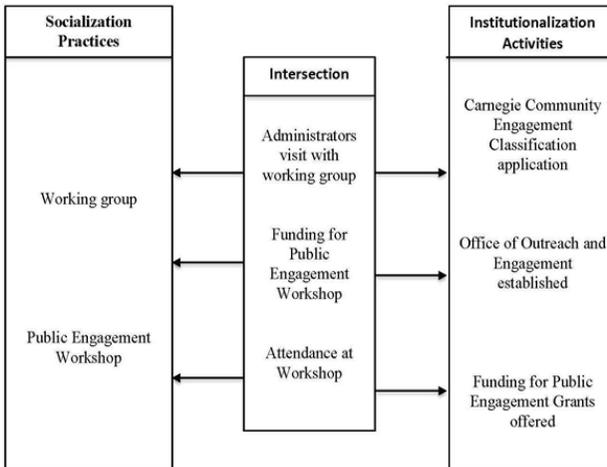


Figure 2. Possible intersections of socialization and institutionalization.

Figure 2 shows how our public engagement practice represents the intersection of the institutionalization and socialization axes in Sandmann et al. (2008). Although we cannot claim a causal relationship between the activities of our group and the institution, the intersection provided a means for bidirectional influences and support, as the figure illustrates.

## Finding Our Next Steps

Since the purpose of the workshop was to create a space for public engagement socialization, the group gathered information from attendees to consider impact and to illuminate a path forward. Data were collected through video interviews during the workshop and through an online questionnaire. We explain this follow-up study in terms of definitions and areas of interest from the workshop, which has directed the subsequent steps of our working group.

### Definitions as Reflection on Impact and Socialization

Early on, our working group adopted a definition of public engagement to guide our work, as previously described. We decided to return to definition as a format to reflect on our workshop's impact by collecting participants' definitions of public engagement and analyzing these through discourse analysis. Our purpose was not to judge the correctness of definitions but to uncover and highlight compelling themes to guide efforts in socialization with the institution.

Eighteen workshop participants agreed to be recorded on video sharing their definitions for public engagement. Near the end of the workshop, we invited them to respond on camera to the question "What is public engagement?" Nine faculty members, seven graduate students, one staff member, and one community partner participated. Comments ranged in length from one to 12 sentences.

We used qualitative methods (*Gee, 2014; Merriam, 2009*) to analyze the definitions through a lens of discourse analysis. Our goal was to determine the levels of awareness and document the larger themes mentioned by participants. One working group member, along with a graduate student familiar with discourse analysis procedures, began the analysis by reading through all video commentaries and making notes of emergent themes for further review. Gee's (2014) tools of inquiry were applied as lenses for understanding language-in-use in particular data. Guided by the workshop purposes that were described earlier, we reviewed the transcripts several times, coding for language features such as adjectives used to describe public engagement, passive/active voice, and pronouns ("we" versus "they").

Examining the responses alongside the working definition of public engagement we have used to guide our work, we were initially

struck by the complexity of enacting a definition that embraces all facets and members of a university campus. Simply said, it is one thing to develop awareness of public engagement, yet quite another to understand what constitutes a good and appropriate fit for all members of a campus community. This can challenge socialization practices that employ a one-size-fits-all approach.

For example, the lives of faculty and graduate students are often shaped by the tenets of scholarship and teaching as they contemplate public engagement. This was revealed in a definition by a graduate student:

I think for me public engagement is participating in something that is larger than myself. As a student I think it's really easy for me to get wrapped up in the research that I'm doing and the academics and the rigor and sort of get lost in that. And public engagement really is a reminder for me that there is something larger and sort of a bigger reason that I can participate in these things. It's going to mean something more than having lines on my resume.

On the other hand, staff responsibilities may or may not include expectations of research/scholarship. Consequently, staff members' view of public engagement is likely guided by what most campuses define as outreach or service.

The majority of respondents' comments revealed the desire to move toward public engagement by building on democratic principles often at the heart of the public university mission (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2012). For instance, one faculty member commented,

Public engagement is a relationship that's established between people in the university community who teach and do research and do service, and the community (people of the community) so that there is reciprocal benefit, mutual benefit, and also something for the greater good.

However, we found in the definitions some conflicting discourse surrounding the notion of "community" in public engagement. Because of the presence of the word *community* in all but one definition, we used Gee's (2011) relationship-building task to explore the kinds of relationships that workshop participants had experienced or hoped to create with community partners.

Some workshop participants offered definitions that indicated a hierarchical relationship between university and community. Participants used a number of phrases to describe the part that the university would play in such a relationship:

- Bring knowledge and research to community
- Make communities stronger with better living standards
- Focus on vulnerable segments of community
- Make communities safer and healthier
- Bring knowledge and experiences to community
- Serve the community
- Better the community as a whole
- Develop programs that have an immediate impact
- Sell something we believe in and then sell it to the community

Such phrases indicate that university members enter communities to save, improve, and better those sites. Simply expressed, the university does work on or to a community rather than *with* a community. This perspective may undermine an equally balanced perspective in public engagement.

Conversely, other interview comments reflected a view of the university as an equitable partner in forming relationships *with* a community and engaging community members as partners. Participants used phrases indicating this perspective:

- Work toward complementary relationship with community
- Be in the community and learn from the community
- Achieve equity with community partners
- Identify as member of the community and also as a scholar
- Learn from the community/encouraging participation

One community member's definition of public engagement illuminated the equality in expertise and complementary backgrounds that should characterize this work:

Well, I'm from the community partner side of things so I guess that I'm just thinking about trying to provide some kind of enriched learning experience for students in the University. As a Rotarian, I think that there's a complementary relationship there. Rotarians have some resources, typically a lot of experience. Young people in

college have a lot of energy and idealism and you bring the two together and a lot of great things can happen, as much for the students as for the humanitarian service groups.

Overall, our analysis revealed more comments were placed in a category positioning the university in a hierarchical relationship with communities than in one reflecting an equitable relationship. As research suggests, the word *community* can represent a romanticized concept that we return to in times of uncertainty when a shared vision makes a daunting challenge seem possible (Bortolin, 2011). Community is “warmly persuasive” (Creed, 2006) and seductive (Williams, 1983) when used and allows us to gloss over complications of hierarchies, as well as differing values brought about by institutions, systems, and organizations (White, 2010).

Applying critical discourse analysis to these definitions revealed that our workshop participants held views that reflected some aspects of our working group’s definition, namely that public engagement is about collaboration and should cut across teaching, research, and service. In contrast with our group’s definition, the definitions of publicly engaged scholarship also revealed a perception of unidirectionality of benefit (i.e., university members helping community). This finding suggests that the definitions did not fully encompass “reciprocity and mutual benefit” nor the processes and values of civil democracy, revealing the need for further emphasis on the bidirectional nature of public engagement. Our group has continued to explore the theme of community to pursue a balanced view of knowledge in our publicly engaged work.

## **Participants’ Interests in Public Engagement Socialization**

Along with close analysis of definitions, we also collected information through a follow-up survey to explore who attended the workshop and what their current projects and future interests were. After the workshop, all participants were sent a brief online survey containing questions related to publicly engaged scholarship. The survey respondents included 30 faculty, staff, and graduate students with wide representation across the university. The surveys were analyzed with descriptive statistics.

The survey revealed that 63% of the respondents reported being involved with engaged scholarship (teaching, research, and/or service), spanning areas from literacy to neuroscience. Many

reported participation in multiple publicly engaged projects. Of the 33 separate projects on which specific information was provided, 61% involved teaching, 70% involved research, and 85% involved service.

Survey participants were asked to select topics that they were interested in learning more about (illustrated in Figure 3). Respondents could select more than one option, and the survey allowed them to write in other topics. The results revealed a preference for learning about the role of public engagement in academic culture (79%), ethical issues related to publicly engaged scholarship (62%), the Carnegie designation as an engaged institution (59%), and getting started as a publicly engaged scholar (45%). In the “other” category, which allowed write-in suggestions, participants listed the following topics:

- promotion and tenure,
- engaged projects at the university,
- human subjects Internal Review Board hurdles,
- assessment of publicly engaged scholarship, and
- connecting undergraduates to engaged projects.

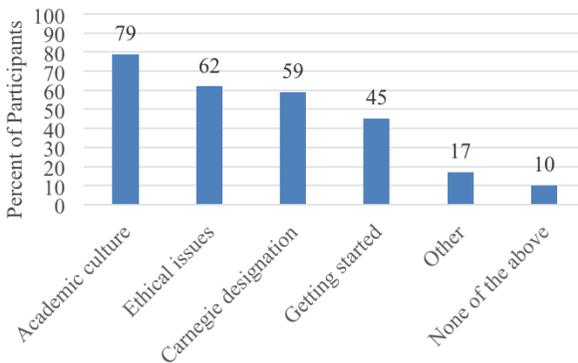


Figure 3. Topics of interest for future workshops.

The results of our questionnaire revealed several key points. First, strong interest exists in public engagement among the members of the university community. However, their ability to turn this interest into action may be hampered by the need for further awareness, resources, and education that are necessary for addressing some of the practical issues of involvement with public engagement (e.g., rigor and publicly engaged scholarship, understanding outcomes, promotion and tenure, ethics).

Addressing these issues through socialization practices and with institutionalization at policy levels can allow members of the university community to engage with communities and receive the recognition that this commitment of time and energy merits.

## Next Steps

From the data collected during and after the workshop, we noted an undercurrent of commitment to civil democracy with a need to be more diligent in creating partnerships that are truly bidirectional through encouraging and welcoming community involvement in all stages of project planning, implementation, and evaluation. Bringing a critical lens to our analysis uncovered issues with the perception of the community and university roles in engaged work and thus illuminated an area for further attention at our university and perhaps in the field of public engagement at large. The summer after our workshop, our working group organized a half-day meeting with our community partners. We funded our community partners' visit to campus and over brunch, we joined them in a discussion of what they saw as the benefits and challenges of engagement with the university. Our intention was to give them the floor to talk about partnerships, and their input was invaluable. Although we are still working to understand the implications of the tenets of reciprocity and mutual benefit, this meeting was inspiring and thought-provoking.

This finding is also reflected in a current project of our working group focused on how language and literacy mediate health care for immigrant families. We began this study using a model of community-based participatory research (*Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003*), which we felt responded to the need for a balanced bidirectional approach to public engagement in research. Following this approach, we met with members of the communities that our group members engage with and collectively arrived at an area of investigation that was a need for the communities and an interest for the faculty in the working group. We applied for and received funding from one of our colleges, and data collection is currently underway.

We have also further developed the intersection between socialization practices and institutionalization. Specifically, the associate provost of the Office for Outreach and Engagement has become a permanent member of the working group. In our monthly meetings, she shares the recent activities of the office and participates in the discussions that we undertake as we explore

our projects and issues of public engagement. Her involvement continues the bidirectional intersection between the socialization and institutionalization of public engagement at our university.

On a final note, our findings from the workshop participants' definitions suggest a need for measures for evaluating outcomes of community-engaged scholarship that go beyond the traditional metrics of published research in academic journals; recognizing measures that elevate the role and voice of community members through outcomes relevant to partners could be a step in structural innovation in higher education. Our group has discussed embarking on work to improve our understanding of and capacity for assessment and evaluation in public engagement.

### **Starting and Sustaining a Working Group on Public Engagement**

Our ongoing experience as a working group has benefited group members professionally and personally. By hosting the workshop, we invited the university community to join our exploration of public engagement. In closing, we suggest several tools that others may find relevant for similar endeavors.

- *Creating venues for information exchange and encouraging institutional structure.* Our workshop revealed campuswide interest in public engagement, which is foundational for further development. One way to build upon this foundation is to foster greater awareness and deeper understanding of public engagement throughout the university. Support for faculty, staff, and students in public engagement may include professional development on ethical issues, initiating engaged projects, and guidance on navigating academic culture while pursuing such work.
- *Supporting and sustaining smaller groups.* Although our institution has supported our group through important “first order” changes, we agree with Childers et al. (2002) that learning communities are needed to ballast institutional change toward public engagement. A working group of university colleagues is one manifestation; other possibilities include professional learning communities (PLCs) with community partners. Coming together on a regular basis and having honest conversations about public

engagement projects, practices, and problems will provide unique support and encouragement that the larger institutional structures cannot.

- *Emphasizing balanced partnerships with communities.* As campuses build awareness of public engagement, we should devote careful attention to the language used to persuade, invite, and open collaborations. Understanding the importance of the small words—*with* communities rather than *to* communities (P. Clayton, personal communication, March 12, 2014)—seems a good touchstone as we begin to deepen our understandings of public engagement.

During our time together as a working group, we have learned and explored issues in our institution related to public engagement. Scholars in public engagement have developed models and reported on research reflecting that faculty, staff, and students desire and even require venues to share, socialize, and discuss public engagement (Childers et al., 2002; Franz et al., 2012; Sandmann et al., 2008). Our working group was formed for this reason, and the evolution of our work expanded conversations to a larger group through a 1-day workshop. These socialization activities developed an evolved understanding of public engagement within the roles we play in our institution. With this socialization, we believe our present community partnerships—as well as our future ones—can become stronger.

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