Evaluating Engaged Research in Promotion and Tenure: Not Everything That Counts Can Be Counted

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Abstract

As institutions of higher education evolve and adapt to meet the increasing needs of their communities, faculty are faced with the choice of where and how to employ their time and expertise. To advance and encourage partnerships between institutions and their communities, academic reward structures must be designed in ways that support those who choose to leverage their expertise, resources, and time to engage with community in meaningful and mutually beneficial ways. This dissertation (Wendling, 2022) contributes to the growing body of higher education community engagement literature by investigating how school- and department-level promotion and tenure committees not only define and understand faculty's engaged research, but how they *evaluate* it. Specifically, this dissertation explored what goes into making evaluative decisions, if and how committees utilize tools for evaluation, and how evaluative decisions are made.

Keywords: community engaged research, community engaged scholarship, promotion and tenure

ince its foundations, American higher education has been inextricably linked to the public good. Higher education has long held a special place in American society, expanding public knowledge, creating tomorrow's leaders, and advancing social consciousness (Chambers, 2005; Newman & Couturier, 2002). Though the roots of higher education's involvement in society have long run deep, many fear that in the last few decades, higher education has been slowly shifting from a public to a private good. Though 95% of urban research institutions have made a commitment to community engagement in their most recent strategic plans, only 55% of Americans believe higher education has a positive impact on society (Accardi, 2018). Many believe that higher education's greatest challenge in rectifying its sullied public image requires institutions to better articulate societal benefit beyond individual economic security. It is thus essential that higher education not only continue to engage in community, but that it do so deeply and meaningfully, in ways that are beneficial to both the institutions and their communities. Higher education community engagement not only helps improve the public perception of postsecondary education, but directly illustrates institutions' usefulness to the public. In today's deeply divided political climate, engagement with community could not be of higher importance.

Working within higher education, specifically in a faculty role, involves a professional identity that embraces a commitment to advancing the public good through teaching and/or research (Austin, 2015; Shaker, 2015; Tierney & Perkins, 2015). Though individual faculty members' commitments and ideologies differ based on location, appointment type, and the various configurations of campus and community, giving to the public good remains "at the heart of academic work" (Austin, 2015, p. 55). This is not to suggest that every faculty member on every university campus must be deeply involved with local communities. However,

academic work dedicated to advancing the public good must not be considered something above and beyond what faculty are required to do, but rather something that is deeply engrained in what it means to be an academic (Austin, 2015; Tierney & Perkins, 2015). Though the professional identity and responsibility of those working in higher education involves at its core advancing the public good, the current academic labor market threatens to disrupt this notion. The increase in the number of contingent faculty, who are limited to a narrow list of specific work requirements with diminishing time, resources, and autonomy, creates few opportunities for faculty to focus their work on advancing the public good (Austin, 2015).

As the academic labor market continues to evolve, faculty, given less independence, resources, and rewards, are faced with the choice of where to employ their precious time and expertise (Rice et al., 2015). Concurrently, the American public increasingly questions higher education's impact and society's return on their investment (Saltmarsh & Wooding, 2016). Institutions must hold themselves accountable to society by publicly rewarding and recognizing the faculty who choose to engage their teaching and research with community. Academic reward structures, institutional and departmental culture, and practices that socialize faculty into pursuing various types of work must be designed in ways that support those who choose to leverage their expertise, resources, and time to engage community. Higher education can no longer remain silent and immobile when it comes to valuing and rewarding those within its institutions who engage with community.

Problem and Purpose

Current research suggests that institution-level rhetoric praising community engagement and the rewarding of engaged faculty through promotion and tenure are often inconsistent (Alperin et al., 2018; Diamond, 2005; O'Meara, 2002; Saltmarsh et al., 2009; Sobrero & Jayaratne, 2014). The perceived misalignment between institutional rhetoric and rewarding engaged faculty is problematic, specifically for institutions seeking to cultivate an identity of an engaged institution and be recognized for it (e.g., obtaining the Carnegie Foundation's community engagement classification). As campuses work toward infusing community engage-

ment into their institutional missions and strategic plans, and are acknowledged for doing so, there is a need for research that explores this suggested dissonance between institution-level praise for engagement and how engaged faculty are rewarded through promotion and tenure.

However, the task of appropriately rewarding engaged faculty should not be left solely to institution-level leadership. It is well documented that the values, beliefs, and personal experiences of school- and department-level promotion and tenure committees influence their likelihood to reward and promote faculty who pursue engaged research (Diamond, 2005; O'Meara, 2002; Sobrero & Jayaratne, 2014). Studies show that changes to institution-level promotion and tenure guidelines reflecting an increased acceptance of community-engaged research do not necessarily ensure a similar acceptance of such research in school- and department-level guidelines (Alperin et al., 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Though school- and department-level reward processes are undoubtedly influenced by written guidelines and committee members' values and beliefs, there is currently a gap in the literature exploring the evaluative processes that school- and department-level promotion and tenure committees undertake when evaluating tenure-track faculty's engaged research or how evaluative judgments are made.

Multiple resources (Abel & Williams, 2019; Jordan et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2018) have been created to assist in the evaluation of faculty's community-engaged research, but there is currently a lack of knowledge regarding if, or how, such resources are being used. Further, research has not yet explored how committees' evaluative processes align, or fail to align, with institutional rhetoric when it comes to community engagement. As community-engaged research often operates in historically nontraditional ways, in that it includes community members as coresearchers, seeks to produce additional scholarly products outside peer-reviewed publications, and often favors local impact over national recognition, it cannot be evaluated in the same ways as traditional research (Boyer, 1990; Deetz, 2008; Ellison & Eatman, 2008; Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002). Consequently, there is a need for a better understanding of how promotion and tenure committees at the school and department levels make evaluative decisions regarding

tenure-track faculty's community-engaged research.

Research Questions

This dissertation (Wendling, 2022) was guided by three major research questions:

1. How do school- and department-level promotion and tenure committee members evaluate tenure-track faculty's community-engaged research?

    a. What guidelines, tools, and/or processes, or lack thereof, guide school- and department-level promotion and tenure committee members' evaluation of community-engaged research (e.g., school/department-level guidelines and language, institution-level guidelines and language, peer review/letters, rubrics, other tools, etc.)?

2. How are community-engaged research processes and community-engaged research products (community-engaged scholarship) evaluated by school- and department-level promotion and tenure committees?

    a. How do school- and department-level promotion and tenure committees differentiate community-engaged research processes (e.g., cocreation of study design, research questions) and products (community-engaged scholarship) when evaluating the engaged work of tenure-track faculty?

3. What supports do institutions have in place to attract, retain, and reward tenure-track faculty who perform community-engaged research?

Conceptual Framework

To better understand and demystify the evaluative processes of promotion and tenure committees, this dissertation was couched in the interpretivist tradition, which seeks to generate working hypotheses or ideas that are fundamentally grounded in the context-specific, constructed social realities of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study was qualitative in nature, due to the desire to emphasize participant voice and demonstrate meaning and understanding about issues that would otherwise be unidentified in quantitative research (Berg, 1995).

Most prominently influencing the direction and methodology of this dissertation was Alperin et al.'s (2018) review of promotion and tenure guidelines across 129 American and Canadian institutions that identified the presence of traditional and engaged research terminology. To date, Alperin et al. have delivered the most thorough content analysis of promotion and tenure guidelines across various institution types, ultimately leading to the conclusion that "if there is one thing that is certain to count towards faculty career progression, it is producing traditional academic outputs" (p. 15). This research built upon the current literature to further investigate how review committees at institutions classified as *engaged* evaluate the nontraditional scholarship of their peers.

Methodology

Multisite Single Case Study

Due to the nature of this dissertation, desire to build upon prior research, and the complex phenomenon of evaluation within promotion and tenure, a multisite single case study was identified as the most appropriate approach to investigate the research questions. This dissertation was intentionally bounded in terms of the identified phenomenon (case), sites (institutions), and participants (faculty). Binding the case in this way encouraged the consideration of how other actors and entities affect the phenomenon being studied. It acknowledged that school- and department-level committees are not the entire, bounded case in and of themselves, but are influenced and affected by a handful of other entities—including, but not limited to, institutional missions and guidelines; school, department, and institutional cultures; and external organizations and/or associations.

Institutional Sites

Institutions for this study were first required to have received an initial classification or reclassification for community engagement from the Carnegie Foundation in the 2020 classification cycle (*N* = 119). Site selection was narrowed to 2020 Carnegie-classified institutions to involve only institutions that had been identified as the most advanced in institutionalizing community engagement across their campuses. The scope of this study was further narrowed by including only R1 institutions (*N* = 28). R1 institutions

were intentionally chosen due to their significant emphasis on traditional research, as opposed to teaching or academic service. Due to their heavy focus on research outputs, there is inherently more tension at R1 institutions to accept and place community-engaged research on par with traditional research.

This study included five of the 28 R1, recently classified institutions. The five participating institutions were included and requested to participate because professional relationships with community engagement professionals (CEPs) at those institutions previously existed, which significantly aided in the recruitment of individual participants. The five institutions, along with notable characteristics of each, are identified in Table 1.

Participants

Once IRB human subjects approval was secured, study participants were recruited from the identified institutions with the help of CEPs on each campus. Acknowledging the need to narrow the participant selection in ways that allowed for a detailed exploration of the research questions, the following participant inclusion criteria were established:

- Are a tenured faculty member and currently serving on their school- and/or department-level promotion and tenure review committee *or have* served on their school- and/or department-level promotion and tenure review committee within the past 12 months

- Have a primary appointment in either:

Table 1. Course Characteristics of the Three Courses

	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C	Institution D	Institution E
Control	Private	Private	Public	Public	Private
Region	Northeast	Mid Atlantic	Southeast	Midwest	Northeast
Size and setting	Small city	Large city	Midsize city	Small city	Midsize city
FTE enrollment	24,000	27,000	39,000	43,000	12,000
FTE faculty	2,300	1,400	2,900	2,600	2,900
Engagement in inst. mission	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Engagement in strategic plan	Plan not public	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Highest engagement leadership	Vice Prov. of Engagement	Vice Prov. for DEI and Engagement	Vice Pres. for Public Service	N/A	Vice Pres. Gov. and Comm. Relations
Year(s) Carnegie classified	2010 2020	2020	2010 2020	2010 2020	2020

- Social science field
- STEM field (i.e., science, technology, engineering, math)

- Have some familiarity with community-engaged research as an approach to inquiry

In total, 12 tenure-track faculty members across five institutions participated in this study. Table 2 outlines key characteristics of each participating tenure-track faculty member. Pseudonyms were utilized for all participants.

Data Sources

Participant Interviews

Individual participant interviews were the primary source of data. The interviews were semistructured, lasted roughly 60 minutes each, and were all conducted via Zoom during summer 2020. Interview questions were constructed to address the central research questions and incorporated a series of structured, neutral probes to elicit additional information about the participants' experiences (Berg, 1995). The interview protocol included 10 major questions that were categorized into three specific phases:

1. Phase 1: Building understanding

2. Phase 2: Evaluating community-engaged research—processes and products

3. Phase 3: Looking forward

Promotion and Tenure Guidelines

In order to better understand participant interview data in light of their individual campus contexts, a review of the institution-level promotion and tenure guidelines at each university was completed. The review was exploratory in nature and focused on the frequency of engaged terminology within all areas of the institution-level guidelines. For the review, 20 engaged terms were selected for identification. These terms have been identified as the most frequently used to reference engaged scholarship (Alperin et al., 2018; Wendling & Bessing, 2018). Focus on the institution-level guidelines was necessary, as the majority (75%) of the school- and department-level guidelines for institutions within this study were not publicly accessible. The review of the guidelines helped, post data collection, to validate, confirm, and at times question the

perspectives of participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of participant interviews consisted of the following phases:

1. Transcription of participant interviews.

2. Data exploration, review, and memoing: This phase included a review of all transcribed data from a holistic perspective with the goal of understanding the breadth and scope of all data within single participants, within single institutions, and across multiple institutions.

3. Open coding and the development of raw codes: Open coding, or the development of raw codes to illustrate the major categories of information identified within the data, occurred after, and was influenced by, the more general data exploration and memoing phase (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

4. Iterative, axial coding assisted by participant member checks: Focused axial coding involved the creation of additional codes and subcodes concentrated on specific ideas and concepts, which allowed for more in-depth theorizing about the original concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Identified themes were emailed to all study participants for feedback. Participant feedback was considered and influenced the next phase of data analysis.

5. Selective coding, data reduction, and development of themes: This selective coding was more conceptual than the previous process of line-by-line coding and identified codes that frequently appeared throughout the data (Stake, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

6. Examining the data in light of current literature: Following the analysis and emergence of solidified codes and themes, findings were presented using thick description and aided by participant voice (Geertz, 1973).

Ensuring Trustworthiness

To ensure the study upheld the tenets of good qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness (i.e., neutrality, consistency, applicability, and truth value) served as a guide throughout the study's data collection, analysis, and

Table 2. Study Participants

	Institution	Field	Gender	Race	Years at current institution	Discipline	Experience evaluating engaged research	Frequency of their engaged research
Douglas	C	STEM	M	White	17	Ag. science	Moderate	Often
Felix	B	Social science	M	White	20	Public health	Low	Often
Joyce	E	Social science	F	White	17	Education	Moderate	Often
Jerry	E	STEM	M	White	25	Medicine	High	Often
Debra	A	Social science	F	White	6	Design	High	Often
Andrea	C	Social science	F	White	6	Education	High	Always
Julie	D	Social science	F	White	27	Nursing	High	Often
Stephen	E	STEM	M	White	42	Psychiatry	Very high	Often
Thomas	B	Social science	M	White	20	Public policy	Moderate	Often
Louis	E	STEM	M	White	35	Psychiatry	Very high	Sometimes
Phillip	C	STEM	M	White	12	Ag. science	High	Sometimes
Kathleen	C	STEM	F	White	13	Medicine	Low	Sometimes

presentation of findings. Lincoln and Guba's criteria were also aided by key techniques to establish trustworthiness—member checks, thick description of findings, and data triangulation.

Results and Conclusions

All participants identified that within their departments and schools, a lack of clearly defined and accepted terminology to refer to community-engaged research, coupled with rigid promotion and tenure guidelines and traditionally standardized metrics, severely limits the ability of review committees to appropriately evaluate engaged scholarship. These were the most frequently cited barriers to properly evaluating tenure-track faculty's engaged research:

- no articulated definition of community-engaged research or scholarship within school- or department-level promotion and tenure guidelines,

- absence of "community-engaged research" or similar terminology within school and department guidelines,

- narrow conception of research that excludes community-engaged scholarship and incorrectly categorizes it as service,

- reliance on traditional metrics to assess the quality of engaged scholarship,

- inability to evaluate quality research processes and reliance on bean counting to assess the quality of research, and

- lack of supports to help committees understand and evaluate engaged scholarship (e.g., definition sheets, rubrics).

Identified barriers were consistent across all participant disciplines, institution types, locations, and length of time their institution had been classified as "community engaged" by the Carnegie Foundation (2020 reclassification or 2020 initial classification). Further, the review of each university's institution-level promotion and tenure guidelines identified that engagement terminology does not feature heavily within the guidelines of any of the institutions, validating many of the feelings and perceptions of the participants.

Though all identified barriers were acknowledged by each participant, the review committees' reliance on traditional metrics to assess the quality of engaged scholarship was cited as the issue of most concern. Although the reliance on traditional metrics is affected by some barriers (e.g., absence of engaged terminology in guidelines) and magnifies others (e.g., narrow conception of scholarship, inability to evaluate research processes), it was identified by participants as the greatest obstacle around which review committees cannot maneuver. Review committees' heavy reliance on a standard set of metrics to evaluate the products of both traditional scholarship and nontraditional, community engagement scholarship was identified as the largest and most frustrating barrier by all participants.

Reliance on Traditional Metrics

Participants cited five common metrics that, in their experiences, review committees most heavily rely on to evaluate tenure-track faculty's scholarship. Each metric comes with unique challenges when committees attempt to assess engaged research through the lens of the traditional metric. Table 3 identifies the most cited metrics, the unique challenges they pose when attempting to utilize them to evaluate engaged scholarship, and how frequently the metric appeared in the promotion and tenure guidelines for the campuses within this study.
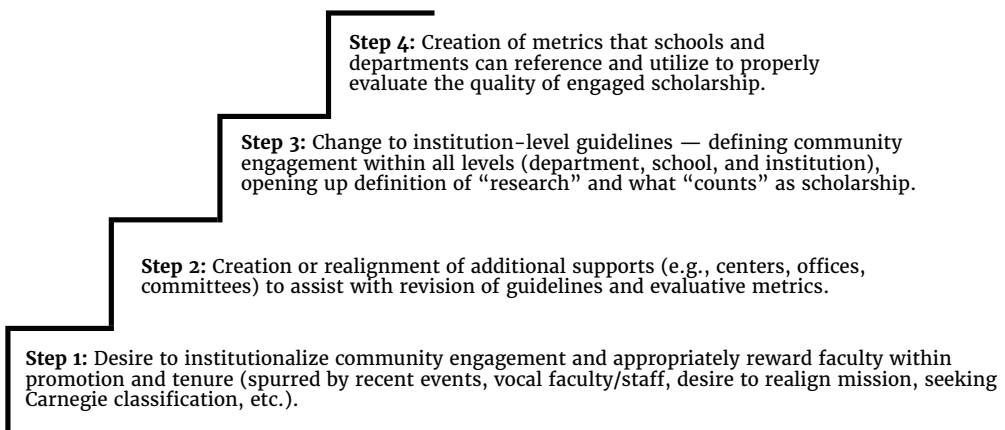
Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education

In today's climate, momentum, though minimal, is slowly building to chip away at the rigid layers of promotion and tenure and push to expand what counts as valued and meaningful faculty work, including engagement and research with community partners. When considering how institutions might open up the current structures of promotion and tenure, this dissertation provided four clear recommendations for institutions and their leadership to consider in order to more appropriately value the engaged research of tenure-track faculty (see Figure 1). It is important to note that the creation of more accommodating guidelines and definitions of scholarship is not the final step. It is imperative that institutions not only adjust guidelines at both the institution and school/department levels, but

Table 3. Traditional Metrics Used to Evaluate Faculty Scholarship and Challenges When Applied to the Evaluation of Community–Engaged Scholarship

Traditional metric	Challenge	Presence of metric in guidelines
Peer-reviewed publications	Recognized as the "gold standard" and only acceptable outlet for the dissemination of scholarly work. Is not inclusive of community-based dissemination outlets or other scholarship (e.g., community presentations, laws/public policy, delivery of products or services).	High
Funding	Only national funding is recognized and valued. Local/regional funding is not acknowledged as legitimate or valuable.	Medium
Reputation	A faculty member's reputation and accomplishments with local partners is not considered or valued. Only the national/international reputation and reach of a faculty member is considered.	Medium
Impact	Impact is measured solely by journal impact factors. Community engagement journals typically have lower impact factors. Local/regional or community-based impact is not acknowledged.	High
External letters	Only opinions of other academics hold weight. Community members are not seen as peers and deemed unable to appropriately speak to the work of faculty.	High

Figure 1. Recommended Steps for Institutions Working to Appropriately Recognize and Reward Community–Engaged Research and Scholarship Within Promotion and Tenure

Step 4: Creation of metrics that schools and departments can reference and utilize to properly evaluate the quality of engaged scholarship.

Step 3: Change to institution–level guidelines — defining community engagement within all levels (department, school, and institution), opening up definition of "research" and what "counts" as scholarship.

Step 2: Creation or realignment of additional supports (e.g., centers, offices, committees) to assist with revision of guidelines and evaluative metrics.

Step 1: Desire to institutionalize community engagement and appropriately reward faculty within promotion and tenure (spurred by recent events, vocal faculty/staff, desire to realign mission, seeking Carnegie classification, etc.).

Note. Steps are shown in the suggested sequence to build on each other; however, they likely will be performed concurrently and inform each other.

Table 4. Current, Traditional Metrics Used to Evaluate Faculty Scholarship and Proposed Adjustments to More Appropriately Evaluate Community–Engaged Scholarship

Traditional metric	Proposed adjustment
Peer-reviewed publications	Expand the notion of what "counts" as evidence of scholarship. In addition to peer-reviewed publications, equally weight other forms of scholarship and involvement of other, community-based audiences. Examples of additional outputs to evidence faculty scholarship: • Community programs/reports • Laws/public policy • Delivery of products and/or services • Community presentations • Creative products (e.g., art shows, videos)
Funding	Recognize local/regional funding received by faculty as evidence of the need for their work with local/regional communities. Consider outputs and outcomes of locally funded research on par with products of nationally funded projects.
Reputation	Acknowledge the reputation of faculty on a local/regional level, as evidenced by voices of community members and/or partner organizations.
Impact	Expand impact beyond journal impact factors. For engaged faculty, also consider • depth of relationship faculty member has established with community, • impact of faculty member's scholarship (e.g., policy, programs) on community, through community voice, and • number of community members or organizations impacted.
External letters	If faculty conducts engaged research, their academic peer reviewers should also conduct and/or be knowledgeable about engaged research. Community partners with whom engaged faculty work should be considered as equally legitimate reviewers who can speak to the community-based work of their faculty partners. More reliance on partner voice is essential.

also revise the metrics upon which faculty scholarship is assessed. In order to advance meaningful change, it will be essential to create and include additional metrics that consider the nontraditional ways quality community–engaged research operates (e.g., inclusion of community members as coresearchers, creation of additional scholarly products outside peer–reviewed publications, favoring local impact over national recognition).

Recommendations for School/Department Leaders and Review Committees

Though change is much needed at the institution level to build structures and supports, broaden the definition of scholarship, and create guidelines and referenceable metrics upon which to evaluate engaged scholarship, change must simultaneously occur at the school and department levels to be sustained. Further, the creation of a culture and the establishment of policies, procedures, and guidelines to support and fuel the developing culture go hand in hand. When it comes to actions that can be taken by school and department leaders, this dissertation suggested that the first step must

be the expansion of what "counts" or what is defined as scholarship. Before appropriate metrics can be created to evaluate engaged research, it must first be identified and defined as "big R" research (as opposed to service) within the formal school and department promotion and tenure guidelines. The products of community-engaged research thus must be validated and accepted as research outputs that are on par with the products of traditional research.

However, recognizing community-engaged research products as valid forms of scholarship is only half the battle. This dissertation has demonstrated that when engaged research is categorized as research, review committees are required to assess it as such, and they have only one very limited set of metrics upon which to evaluate it. This dissertation illustrated how incredibly difficult it is for review committees to evaluate engaged scholarship using the current metrics that have been constructed to assess traditional scholarship. To be appropriately evaluated, community-engaged scholarship must be judged against a set of metrics constructed to assess its unique methodologies and rigor. In Table 4, alterations to the current, traditional metrics are proposed to assist with the evaluation of community-engaged scholarship.

Significance

The literature of higher education community engagement is expansive, despite it being a relatively young field. However, past research has primarily focused on the institutionalization of engagement (Benson et al., 2005; Beere et al., 2011; Holland, 1997, 2016), how institutions and faculty engage in community (Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; Colbeck & Wharton-Michael, 2006; Doberneck et al., 2010; Glass et al., 2011),

and the inclusion of community engagement terminology in promotion and tenure guidelines (Alperin et al., 2018; Day et al., 2013; Ellison & Eatman, 2008; O'Meara, 2005, 2011). This dissertation was a direct response to the gap in the field, as research had yet to study the processes by which promotion and tenure review committees evaluate tenure-track faculty's community-engaged research.

As community engagement becomes more infused into institutions' strategic planning efforts, organizational structures, and written promotion and tenure guidelines, the lack of research systematically exploring how and in what ways faculty's engaged research is evaluated was apparent. This study is significant because it addressed the gap in the literature and identified the primary barriers to appropriately evaluating faculty's engaged research (e.g., reliance on traditional metrics). Further, it provided clear recommendations for institutional and school/departmental leadership to consider in order to value the engaged research of their faculty more appropriately. Findings and recommendations add depth, detail, and nuance to the current field while illustrating a clear path forward for institutions to ensure that their rhetoric praising community engagement and the ways they reward their engaged faculty through promotion and tenure are more consistent and authentic. As campuses continue the work of infusing community engagement into their missions, identities, and strategic plans, the findings presented in this dissertation will significantly benefit institutions who wish to better evaluate, legitimize, and ultimately value the engaged work of their faculty.
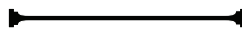
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