

Matthew J. Countryman, "Response to Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University." June, 2008

I am an Associate Professor of History and American Culture at the University of Michigan and, since September 2007, have been the faculty director of the Arts of Citizenship Program at Michigan. Founded a decade-ago by Imagining America's former board chair David Scobey (and with the active support of Imagining America founder Julie Ellison and Syracuse University Chancellor Nancy Cantor), Arts of Citizenship encourages and supports scholarly and creative collaborations between Michigan faculty in the arts, humanities and design and community-based organizations in our region and around the globe.

It is an honor to be here today not only because I am very much the beneficiary of the visionary work carried out by David, Julie and Nancy over the past decade but because the Tenure Team Initiative report could not have come at a better time for Arts of Citizenship. As a number of people have said today, I feel as if the report was written for me. Following a two year re-evaluation of the Arts of Citizenship program's work, Arts of Citizenship's advisory committee-which is made up of university faculty and professional staff--recently identified issues of career trajectory and advancement as a key obstacle to our efforts to promoting public and engaged scholarship at the University of Michigan. To put it another way: We recognize that most Michigan faculty in the arts, humanities and design will not be willing to even consider pursuing publicly-engaged forms of scholarship unless and until we are able to establish institutionally-recognized and legitimated methods of evaluating and rewarding such scholarly work.

So my first response is just to say thank you to Julie Ellison and Tim Eatman. We intend to put this report right to work at Michigan...

More substantively, I would like to highlight what I see as seven essential points in the report's call for high-quality and socially-responsible public scholarship. I should say first that my response to "Scholarship in Public" is driven not just by more than a decade's worth of experience as first a junior faculty member and now an associate professor at a public research university, but even more from observing an institution that is home to some of the foremost practitioners of engaged-scholarship and yet lacks the most basic structures of institutional support for public scholarship— particularly at the department level and particularly in the humanities.

- 1) My first response is that one cannot overestimate the importance of the connection that Nancy Cantor and Steven Lavine draw in the foreword between excellence in public scholarship and the creation of institutionally-legitimated mechanisms of evaluation. It is of course a truism to say that excellence in public scholarship is essential if we are to overcome the stereotype of publicly-engaged scholarship as "do-goodism." But I would go the next step to say that clear and established mechanisms of evaluation are essential to encouraging engaged scholarship of the highest quality. Excellence is of course its own reward, but it is my experience that many more young and mid-career scholars would pursue collaborative scholarly projects if there were clear mechanisms for

getting their work evaluated in ways that promised to advance the arc of their scholarly careers. For every scholar whose social commitments and values will lead them to pursue public scholarship irrespective of any potential for scholarly recognition, there are many more who will pursue their interests in public scholarship when there exists clear mechanisms for evaluation and thus for reward and career advancement for this vital work.

- 2) It is essential that we construct both a common and broadly-understood language of evaluation (what are the best practices of collaboration, etc.) and a community of evaluators—from both the academy and the community-based nonprofit sector—able and willing to conduct holistic evaluations of faculty-community collaborations. The tenure process at Michigan and other research institutions is rooted in the notion of arms-length (i.e. disinterested and therefore purportedly-objective) evaluations of scholarly quality and impact. There is certainly much to debate about the merits of the “publish-or-perish” research-oriented tenure process. But it is clear to me that to be taken seriously within a research institution like the Michigan, advocates of community-engaged collaborative scholarship must develop mechanisms of evaluation that conform to the process of arms-length evaluation.
- 3) As an alternative, one might ask why resist the institutional-tendency to categorize engaged-scholarship simply as community service. Is not service a vital component of the academic project? Should we not just go about our socially-important and frequently all-consuming work and leave the institutional battles to others? It is on these questions that “Scholarship in Public” is at its

most eloquent. The problem is not simply that as service community-engaged scholarship will neither be evaluated nor rewarded in the same ways that scholarship is. As importantly, it is that the scholars mostly likely to pursue community engaged scholarly-projects irrespective of whether there are evaluation and reward structures in place are precisely those scholars—scholars of color, women, younger scholars, scholars in interdisciplinary field and ethnic studies—most at-risk for having their work undervalued and mis-evaluated within the processes of tenure and promotion.

- 4) Carol Schneider’s metaphor of the “flattened” figure eight and the question of whether to seek to change the left (the academic field) or seek to develop the right (the collaborative field) side-loop really resonated with my experience in the academy. While I agree that ideally (in the world as it should be) each side of the loop should inform the other, within my institution at least (my world as it is) it seems to me that the development of the infrastructure of the right (i.e. the engaged) side—by which I mean the development of both best practices for collaborative work but also rigorous, arms-length, mechanisms for evaluating the quality of campus-community collaborations and of their scholarly products (whether traditional publications, public documents, or products in the creative arts)—is essential to convincing the left side to recognize and reward the best work in public scholarship.
- 5) I support as well the report’s call for the development of portfolios of engaged scholarship and models of portfolio evaluation as the standard for assessing faculty-community research and artistic collaborations, particularly as a

mechanism for demonstrating both the value of sustained collaborations and the ways that those collaborations can produce multiple scholarly products along the spectrum from traditional academic publications to more-publicly accessible forms (documentary film, museum installations, community presentations, etc.)

Particularly helpful on this point is George Sanchez's description of university-community collaborations on Los Angeles neighborhood history. One question that remains unanswered for me is whether it is better to create separate portfolios for the engaged scholar's public/community work or whether that work should be integrated into a research portfolio that also includes more traditional scholarly publications?

- 6) I also appreciated the report's emphasis on the importance of winning the support of deans and department chairs as well as central administrators. These are the university leaders who most shape the experience of young and mid-career faculty on a day-to-day basis and their support for engaged-scholarship and the development of legitimated forms of evaluation is essential to integrating this work more fully into the academy. I would similarly second the report's call for particularly integrating public scholarship methodologies and mechanisms of evaluations into departmental policies/expectations.
- 7) On this last point, I think it is important not to overlook the role of the senior professoriate. In my experience, full professors are the crucial gatekeepers at Michigan, particularly when it comes to evaluating tenure case files at both the unit and school/division level. Changing the formal tenure criteria and procedures will prove insufficient if the senior professoriate can't be convinced to take

seriously the claims of a rigorous public scholarship, particularly if they choose to view calls for public scholarship as a threat to the institution's scholarly reputation. On this issue, I was particularly impressed by the workshop model used by Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis to introduce faculty members serving on tenure and promotion committees to multiple forms of scholarship.

Thank you. I look forward to working with the entire Imagining America network to work to implement the recommendation of the Tenure Team report in order to advance the cause of engaged scholarship.