



Downstate New York Regional Meeting

February 26, 2009

Location: [New York University](#)

New York, NY

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Comments for “Engaging the Tenure Report: Voices in Response” Panel,
Downstate NY Regional Meeting of Imagining America (IA)

I’ve been asked to reflect on the Tenure Team’s report from my perspective as a graduate student and I will do so using a few examples from my own experience, and asking of us several questions. I would particularly like to use this opportunity to support its recommendations even as I seek to push us again to think through and act on those larger issues and problems I believe it raises, topics that may not be directly about tenure or promotion but are of crucial importance to graduate students. Later today we’ll likely need to examine these issues and consider strategies for both anticipating objections and mobilizing particular fractions of support—graduate students being among those—as we think about the implementation phase of this report.

One of the motivating impulses of this report is to translate a more expansive notion of what constitutes or is considered the “proper” work of academics into administrative policies and procedures and turn those policies and procedures into material realities on campus and beyond—for faculty, the communities to which they belong, for universities, and for graduate students. Graduate students and faculty continue to perform “publicly engaged academic work” and this report suggests that we need to figure out a way to “giv[e] such work full standing as scholarship, research, artistic creation” (iv) as opposed to following that old notion that such work is



peripheral or irrelevant to a life of scholarship.

This de-valuing of certain knowledge-making modes, practices, and projects doesn't, I think, happen only, at the moment that a junior faculty member goes up for tenure for the first time, the logic that drives tenure review and promotion, the logic of assembling the proper reference letters from sources who "count" or the prestigious publications that that faculty member should have under her belt, that logic is the one in which she is already inculcated, in which she grows and develops, as soon as she steps into grad school (this is certainly true for those who enter research university contexts). So when this report suggests that departmental policies need to be reconsidered and revised and the university should make commitments "to broaden the community of peer review" (2)—a particularly specific and important recommendation—we should model this in graduate programs or even more broadly across the university, think about ways that that model can work deeply down through all registers of university life from the pipeline of graduate students to junior faculty to the work that undergraduate intellectual activists perform. We are speaking about here a matter of valuation, of valuing knowledge production that is not the exclusive claim of professors or scholars in training. Thus when the kinds of critical analysis that we try to bring to our classrooms are brought to bear in contexts outside the classroom, universities should affirm those principles and practices rather than invisibilize or worse penalize them.

A brief note about the recent, very visible student actions on NYU's own campus: whatever position you might take about the demands or approach, these actions sprang from students, mostly undergraduate but graduate as well, whose work on campaigns to make NYU more



transparent and more responsive to its various constituencies were not only the result of feelings of hope, but also analyses of power that were learned in and through the classroom. This tenure report is not concerned with, nor am I specifically arguing that such actions be compensated by the university (for a number of reasons!), but I do offer this recent instance as raising again the 3 larger issue that we're all here concerned with and around which this report centers. Namely, what is “common-sense” in university practice needs to radically re-thought, not just at the tenure and promotion level, but on multiple levels to open up a dialogue with administrators about democracy, inclusionary practices, transparency across the board. [Distribute copies of the open letter that several grad students have worked on this past week in support of the students suspended by NYU]

The drive for grad students to professionalize i.e. to present at the right conferences, publish in the right places, have all the “right” faculty on their dissertation committees in order to get capture that elusive creature, the tenure-track job, happens within a larger workplace that increasingly relies of casualized labor, and this results in less time and energy to sustain interests and commitments outside the formal field of academia and also forecloses the possibility and prestige of fulfilling career options outside of the tenured professorship. This has much to do with, as one faculty member in my department suggested, the supremely individuating practices of research and publication, the scholarly ways of being that grad students learn. This particular faculty member required that my entering cohort engage in an event that brought together research with activism, working with communities outside of NYU—and she was able to actually build in a line-item in the departmental budget for our event. I'll pass around the flyer that we produced for that event, a roundtable forum that we conceptualized, researched, and collaborated



on with multiple grassroots immigration groups working in NYC. [Pass around a copy of the IJ Roundtable Program] On the one hand, this represented quite an opportunity, it was training that rejected the idea of scholarship as happening solely or primarily in hermetically sealed vacuums. On the other hand, we were asked to participate or make a new model of 4 graduate learning without the department recognizing or valuing the additional labor we performed on top of all our other grad school and life commitments. In other words, the department was unable to sustain us doing such work beyond that one semester and beyond that one line-item. By the end of our first year, we were mentally and physically exhausted, being encouraged to develop a new way of relating to scholarship in a departmental culture that itself was not prepared to institutionalize those practices for either its faculty or grad students. Could the recommendations coming out of this tenure report ask departments such as mine (admittedly a relatively unique institutional formation) to recognize the inconsistencies in their own cultures? Between the hope for publicly engaged work and the actual support of such work? That's why the suggestions in the report to build in mentors, learning and research opportunities to co-create with communities, and offer fully compensated opportunities or more substantive internships to develop our interests and commitments are so exciting.

I myself have been engaged in work since the first year of my graduate studies, a collaborative project called "Archeology of Change" with community artist Tomie Arai and the Museum of Chinese in America, which is broadly around the topic of neighborhood change and gentrification in Manhattan's Chinatown. This project fits very well with the report's definition of publicly engaged scholarly work [Pass around AOC goals and vision], but I did this on my own (that is, without the help or resources of my graduate school), conducting oral history interviews and



indexing transcripts in between my regular course and other program requirements. I was unable to figure out a way to connect my research interests, which includes gentrification with this project I was doing about gentrification! And it's only now in my third year of graduate study that parts of this project are being formally recognized by my program. 5 What took so long for those two arenas (my graduate program and the museum-community oral history project) to meet, that gap or disjuncture is what needs to be structurally addressed both because it has to do with the kinds of intellectual work that is valued, which translates to recommendations about tenure and promotion, and because it speaks to the larger problems within universities, struggles over issues of value/valuation, inclusion, community, and labor.

The tenure report declares, “No intellectual compromises” (5). Publicly engaged scholarly work does not equal intellectual work, analysis, or research that is any less complex, well-defined, or rigorous than “traditional” scholarship. Yes, to the definition of publicly engaged academic work as scholarly or creative activity integral to a faculty member’s academic area. But can we be more precise in what we mean by “integral to a faculty member’s academic area”? Yes, to informed, rigorous, deeply self-reflexive and thoughtful projects, the co-production of knowledge with multiple publics, but what if, as they are apt to do, the research interests of graduate students (or faculty) shift? Is there a way to build in support for academic areas that are not the fields of so-called expertise as they emerge? How do we evaluate what activities are integral when for faculty and grad students, our field of vision and action expands over time? How do we engage in activities whose very processes depend on multiple people and cannot quite meet the rigid and formalized demands of an academic/institutional timeline? I ask this question particularly from the view point of interdisciplinary faculty or grad students whose research areas may straddle several



fields, touch on multiple concerns, or be centrally organized around pressing (and constantly changing) political events or movements.

Ultimately, I do wish I had better or more clearly integrated the work I did outside of school with the work I did in school and I certainly wish I had made more time to do more intellectual/community activist work over the course of my grad student career, but I don't blame myself for not being clever or efficient enough, nor do I blame my department which is relatively cutting-edge in terms of what it credits as valuable intellectual-political work. I think, rather, a broader intervention needs to be made about what kinds of academic work should be valued and this report begins to make that intervention by expressing and defining clearly that there are different practices of scholarship; and that publicly engaged work should be valued a key factor in both tenure and promotion for faculty, for instance, and in the actual experience of grad students (at all stages of the doctoral degree—from admissions and coursework to qualifying exams and dissertation defense). What if we did indeed “broaden the community of peer review”? This would enable graduate students to imagine the various and rich present and future worlds we and our scholarship could be part of.