



Virginia Regional Meeting

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Blacksburg, VA

Scholarship in Public:

Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University

The discussion around public scholarship is one of the most exciting conversations in academic life today. It's a discussion built around new concepts of research and creative activity and the potential that scholarship in all of its forms has to impact the daily lives of people beyond the boundaries of the campus itself. While public scholarship is a new concept in many ways, it is also a concept that taps into some well-established traditions in higher education. This is especially true for public comprehensive institutions like Western Kentucky University. WKU was founded about a century ago to meet the educational needs of a region that had very limited opportunities for schooling at any level. Public high schools were still rare south-central Kentucky in 1906, and opportunities for post-secondary education were virtually non-existent. Consequently, from the very beginning WKU has nurtured strong links with its public constituency. While this connection originally grew out of instructional needs, many WKU faculty members over the years have focused their research on Kentucky-related topics in history, literature, geography, geology, climatology, music, religion, and traditional culture among other fields. The Kentucky Library and Museum, built on the WKU campus in the 1930s, is a prime example of the university's long-standing commitment to scholarship on topics related to the Commonwealth.

Several other forces also work to create a favorable climate for public scholarship at WKU. For example, state policymakers strongly encourage community involvement on the part of universities. This encouragement can take many forms, but Kentucky's higher education coordinating board, the Council on Post-secondary Education, has recently pioneered a new incentive through the establishment of the Regional Stewardship Trust Fund. This program promotes regional and state-wide economic development, livable communities, social inclusion, creative governance, and civic participation through public engagement activities initiated by comprehensive university faculty and staff. Its purpose is to link the resources and scholarship of our universities to the needs and challenges of their respective regions. To access these funds, universities must provide tangible evidence of their commitment to regional stewardship including evidence that this work "counts" for faculty rewards such as tenure and promotion. WKU receives \$500,000 annually from the trust fund. Council members believe that Kentucky is the first state in the nation to launch a statewide stewardship program of this nature.

Another important plus for public scholarship at WKU is strong campus leadership, both from the university administration and from faculty peers. Through personal example as well as the commitment of university resources, the university's Provost has encouraged faculty



participation in such initiatives as the American Democracy Project, the Political Engagement Project, and the more recent Civic Agency Initiative, all aimed at building the presence of the academy in surrounding communities. The Provost's commitment in this regard is clear and energetic, giving faculty members a firm message that the university values faculty involvement in such projects. In addition to the Provost, however, the campus also benefits from some very important peer leadership from faculty in this regard. Some of WKU's most respected faculty members—including the university's only recipient of a particularly prestigious state-wide faculty award—have devoted a significant part of their career to public scholarship. I suspect that none of these faculty members think of themselves as leaders in public scholarship, but their work is nonetheless a valuable model for other faculty members.

Perhaps the most crucial element in public scholarship is building it clearly into the faculty rewards structure. WKU has taken an important step in this regard by revising its promotion and tenure guidelines campus-wide. The new documents provide a broader definition of faculty work and a more encompassing definition of scholarship and peer review, all important ingredients in the concept of public scholarship.

Although the concept of public scholarship has a significant foothold in the academic culture of WKU and many other similar institutions as well, considerable work remains to be done. The term *public scholarship* itself is a new one for many faculty members and administrators, even for academics who are already working with some of the concepts of public scholarship. It's a concept that stretches our notions of such central academic concepts as what constitutes scholarship and what defines peer review. Even faculty members who are friendly to the idea of public scholarship sometimes find that they need to think through the full implications of the idea. Finally, while some of the skepticism about public scholarship may come from entrenched senior faculty, a good bit of the hesitancy also comes from cautious junior faculty. They leave graduate school already acculturated to traditional views of scholarship and convinced that traditional scholarship is the surest path to professional achievement, be that a making a conference program, placing an article, or competing for the next job. Their concerns are broader than tenure and promotion and reach to what is valued by their professional colleagues across the discipline.

Public scholarship has the potential to bring some exciting new dimensions to our understanding of scholarship. As such, it is part of the broader discussion about the nature of faculty work and the role of the university in society, discussions that are remaking the academy in significant ways. It's a discussion that promises to enrich universities as well as the communities that nurture them.

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