



The Engaged Scholar

Andrew Hoffman seeks to inspire academic scholars to bring their work to the publics that need it, and to inspire administrators to make public engagement more acceptable and legitimate within their institutions; to enlarge the tent to be inclusive of multiple ways that one enacts the role of academic scholar in service to today's world

Why did you choose to become a professor?

When I feel myself losing track of the purpose or meaning behind my work, I return to this simple question. And my answer is equally simple – I want my research, teaching, and outreach to have a positive imprint on the world around me. Citation counts, A-level publications, and an h-index pale in comparison to that simple outcome.

Yet our reward systems elevate these metrics and they don't come close to capturing my deeper purpose. So, that leaves it to me to decide what is valuable and important in my academic pursuits. I know that that kind of independence is hard to assert, especially when you are early in your academic career. But as you advance, you will have more freedom to exercise your independence. For me, I keep in mind the challenge from Jane Lubchenco, Oregon State marine ecologist and former president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), that academic scholars must abide by the 'scientists' social contract' – that they have an obligation to provide a service to society, to give value for the money provided by public funding, government grants, and tuition revenue. It is an obligation that is born out of both a societal need for the expertise that academics possess and a recognition of the responsibilities that come with the privileged life that academics lead.

I am writing this at a particularly precarious time. The COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc on our lives and our livelihoods. People are suffering and society needs answers. Yet many people are turning away from science, distrusting its conclusions and its motivations, and even questioning its assessment that the virus is real. This is happening because we are now immersed in an array of confusing and conflicting messages that question facts, blur the line between opinion and fact, and dismiss formerly respected sources of information as merely political interests pushing a partisan agenda. This, according to the RAND Corporation, is the existential crisis of our time. If we do not improve the scientific literacy of our public and political discourse, how can we make sense of the challenging issues we face? You can't set policy or make informed decisions about nanotechnology, stem-cell research, nuclear power, climate change, vaccines and autism, genetically modified organisms, endocrine disruption, gun violence, or Covid-19 if you do not agree on a common set of facts to ground the conversation.

“”

It is the existential crisis of our time. If we do not improve the scientific literacy of our public and political discourse, how can we make sense of the challenging issues we face?

To my mind, this existential crisis lays the gauntlet at the door of the Academy. If academic scholars do not provide the kind of scientifically grounded knowledge that society needs, who will? But this societal crisis is happening at a time when the Academy is facing a crisis of its own. Academic research is becoming increasingly irrelevant as the work becomes too insular, the language too opaque, the journals too inaccessible and the cultural norms of disciplinary boundaries too balkanised. We need to break out of our siloed research communities and bring our work to a world that needs it. In the words of former University of Texas at Austin President Larry Faulkner: 'The antidote to irrelevance is engagement of the university with the real needs and aspirations of the supporting society.'

Not every academic must take on this role, but we need to make that path more acceptable and legitimate for those who do; to enlarge the tent to be inclusive of multiple ways in which one enacts the role of academic scholar in today's world. Some may prefer impact in the world of scholarship, but others may wish to have more impact in the world of practice, bringing their insights and knowledge to directly solving the great challenges of our time. While both are needed, unfortunately the academic reward system steers people only toward the former. Even the book that I wrote about this problem will not register highly in my annual review because it is not "academic". A-level publications are the coin of the realm. But if you want to have impact in the real world, you must take your work beyond the academic publications and bring it to the world of practice.

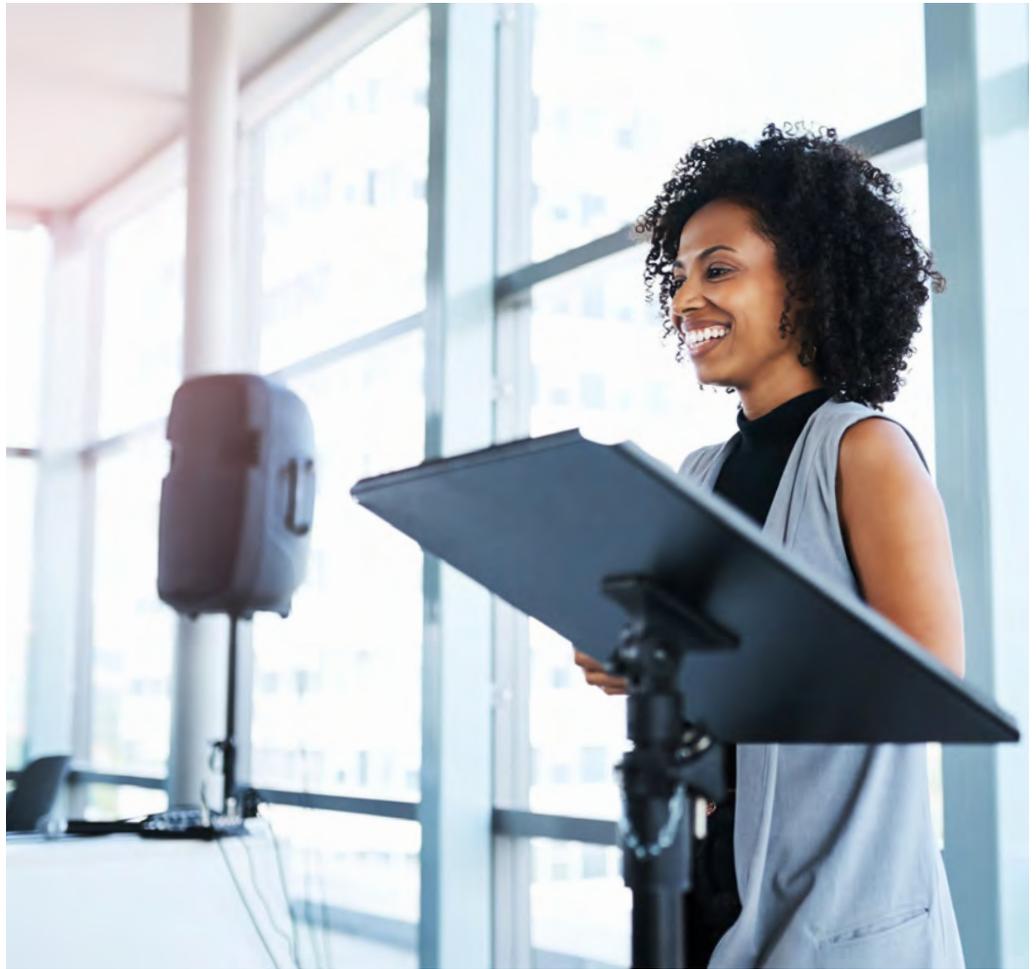
An illustration: I recently asked attendees of an academic seminar to raise their hand if they were concerned about climate change; everyone did. I asked how many devoted their research to the topic; most kept their hands up. I asked how many aimed that research at A-level academic publications; all hands remained raised. I asked how many felt that another A-level academic paper would change how society addressed the issue of climate change; most hands came down. This is the strange irony in which we find ourselves. And it is an irony that some have begun to question.



A new generation of scholars is emerging into the field with a strong desire to make a difference in the real world. My message is for them in particular. Whether they are new PhD students just entering their degree programs, young professors just starting their careers, or mid-career professors who have begun to question the purpose behind their work, my hope is to inspire a career path rooted in rigorous research but expanded with the goal of relevant impact on practice within society. Even seasoned senior professors may find some value in these pages. It is never too late to consider the measure of your life's work based on meaning and purpose instead of status, however defined.

My book does not summarise the entire field of public engagement. While it offers some coverage of the field, it chiefly focuses on the posture and spirit for adopting engagement as part of the academic portfolio. At times, it may stride into the domain of a polemic. But overall, it will be about amending the types of questions we ask in order to blend rigour and relevance, redirecting what we do with the answers to bring them to the attention of those who need them, and recreating the institutional structures for supporting and accelerating changes in how





we create and disseminate research. And it will be about offering hope. I have talked with many PhD students who entered their programmes with the desire to have real-world impact, make a difference, improve society, but after just a couple of years they feel pushed into a corner and toward disillusionment. I don't want them to let the spark die. I want them to hold a vision of their career that strives toward the elusive "Pasteur's Quadrant" where research is inspired by societal needs as it pursues the needs of both use and fundamental understanding.

Public engagement has been the goal throughout my academic career. I study environmental issues because I care about preserving and protecting our natural world. I earned a joint doctoral degree between the schools of business and engineering and was held to that goal by a committee of advisors that included business school professors who asked about the theoretical rigour of my work, and engineering professors who kept asking

'what's the point?' For me, the point is that I want to see the impact of my work in the thoughts, values, and behaviors of those I reach in business, policy, and society. My work stands on the shoulders of the social theorists who came before me. But I use that theoretical knowledge to understand and change the empirical world, and not setting a priority to use the empirical world to contribute to theory within the academic literature. And as I have advanced in my career, the balance of my portfolio slowly shifted in its emphasis from academic to public audiences. I still write academic papers, but I write more books intended to span academic and lay audiences. I take my work to more public audiences through practitioner journals, web essays, radio interviews, and talks at business, government, and non-profit conferences. I'll speak to high school students, senior citizens, local community groups.

I feel like I am fulfilling my purpose when someone approaches me after one of my talks to say that I changed the way they thought about an issue, or an executive tells me that I provided tools that can help them in their job today. I have the same feeling when my books appear in syllabi around the world or are assigned as required summer reading for incoming first-year students. Twice I have been invited to give a convocation address for first years and the satisfaction I feel in reaching those young minds far exceeds anything I have felt in reaching my academic peers in the seminar room.

In the end, these activities define the role of academic for me, and I want to encourage other scholars to do the same when the occasion presents itself. I am a tenured full professor and that means I can do anything I want. I do not intend to cease academic work. But this stage of my career is an opportunity to branch out into domains where I can have real-world impact.

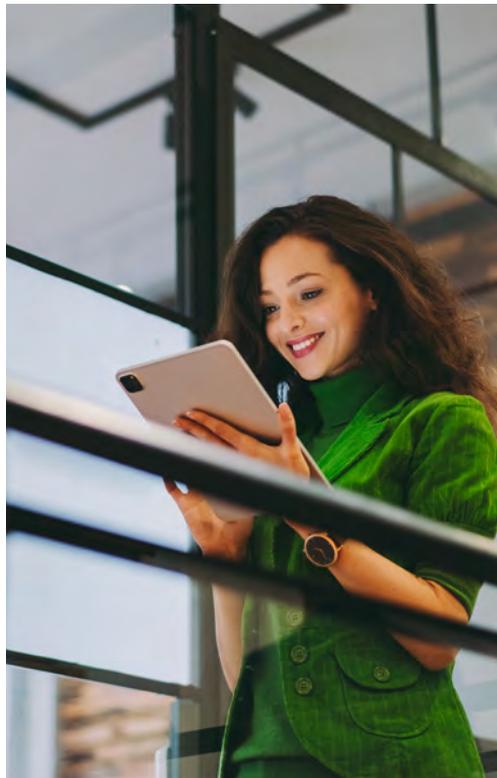
Why don't more senior faculty use the opportunity to experiment? In the words of one of my colleagues, 'a problem with our field is that we have too many senior professors thinking like junior professors'. They chase the same publication counts that they did as junior professors because it feels safe. In the words of University of Michigan President Mark Schlissel:

We forget the privilege it is to have lifelong security of employment at a spectacular university. And I don't think we use it for its intended purpose. I think that faculty on average through the generations are becoming a bit careerist and staying inside our comfort zones. If we're perceived as being an ivory tower and talking to one another and being proud of our discoveries and our awards and our accomplishments and the letters after our name, I think in the long run the enterprise is going to suffer in society's eyes, and our potential for impact will diminish. The willingness of society to support us will decrease.



I have seen some senior professors who, upon reaching retirement, became embittered because their work was not fully recognised by the world. But I wonder what those professors had done to make the work known by the world? Did they write articles in academic journals and think they had contributed to public discourse? For the most part, neither the general public nor lawmakers read them. People will not search out our work in academic journals. We must bring it to the public. Other interests are beating us to the punch, publishing their own reports, often with a political agenda, and using social media to have far more impact on public opinion. Add to this changing landscape a rise in pseudo-scientific journals and we must face the reality that if we continue to write only for specialised scholarly journals, we become relegated further to the sidelines.





As professors we have an opportunity, indeed an obligation, to bring our work to the world. I once heard it proposed that professors should, upon receiving promotion to full professor, be required to write a book that pulls together the 15 to 20 years of their research and aggregates it into a cohesive whole – a book aimed at a lay audience. What an experience that would be! It would both terrify professors and change the view that they hold for their work and its purpose.

The role of full professor is a rare and wonderful gift. Should we not use that gift to make a real and lasting difference in the world? Should we not learn new skills and models for how to play a new role, and see our careers in the long arc that leads to that possibility? The seeds for that possibility must be planted early. One cannot shunt all interest in engagement aside for the 15 to 20 years it takes to get a PhD, tenure, and promotion to full professor, and then

“”

Why don't more senior faculty use the opportunity to experiment? In the words of one of my colleagues, 'a problem with our field is that we have too many senior professors thinking like junior professors'

expect to suddenly reignite the passion. We must cultivate that passion while recognising the expectations and demands of the institutions in which we live and work. Then, when we are ready, we will have found the voice to contribute to society at a time when society most certainly needs us.

Now, more than ever, we need *engaged scholars* who can bring their expertise to the world, informing public and political discourse on the great challenges of our day. For this to happen, we need a more socially literate scientific community to engage a more scientifically literate public. We need scientists who can be effective communicators of what science does, how it does it, what it tells us, and what it means. We need scholars who can take complex issues and ideas and make them understandable to all demographics, young and old, poor and affluent, liberal and conservative. I hope that I can stir enough scholars to begin, or affirm, their journey toward that goal and in so doing make a difference in the world.

This article is an edited excerpt from *The Engaged Scholar: Expanding the Impact of Academic Research in Today's World* (Stanford University Press, 2021)

gf

About the Author

Andrew Hoffman is the Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the School for Environment and Sustainability, University of Michigan. His disciplinary background lies in the areas of organisational behavior, institutional change, negotiations and change management. He has published more than 100 articles and eleven books, two of which have been translated into five different languages.