Defining Civically Engaged Research as Scholarship in Political Science

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Advancing civically engaged research (CER) in higher education requires academics to wrestle with inconsistencies in the meanings assigned to terms describing scholarly activity (Barker 2004; Doberneck, Glass, and Schweitzer 2010). The terminological confusion is so severe that many academics and administrators use terms as fundamental as "research," "scholarship," "service," "engagement," and "community" without awareness of important debates surrounding these words (Harman 2007; Neumann 1993). This lack of awareness can engender misunderstandings that hinder productive discussions about how research can address public problems while still being scholarship. It also creates obstacles for CER to be welcomed in the political science discipline and in scholars' careers.

This article explores key conceptual terms and suggests definitions to advance understanding of CER for political science. It also contrasts CER with other models of how inquiry and knowledge become useful to society. The goal is not to provide definitive answers but rather to sketch borders on a map of new territories that academics must both recognize and explore. We hope that this provides a foundation for much-needed conversations in departments, within the discipline, among administrators, and with nonacademic audiences regarding the nature of engaged research and its place in academia.

BACK TO BASICS: HOW SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH CONNECT

Academic institutions place different weights on the central responsibilities of faculty members, and those responsibilities traditionally encompass three primary areas: teaching, research, and service. Academics often use scholarship as an umbrella term covering all of these areas and their intersections. Under this first broad definition, teaching, research, and service are components of scholarship because they are the core work "of a school." Scholarship, in this sense, is the work that sustains a community of higher learning, and scholars are those who do that work.[2]

However, a second use of scholarship is as a label for inquiry—and resultant products—recognized as meeting standards established by a research community. Diamond and Adam's (2004) synthesis of two decades of discussions on the topic concluded that scholarly research (1) requires a high level of expertise; (2) has clear goals, is based on adequate preparation, and uses appropriate methods; (3) documents and disseminates the activities, results, and critical reflections about its approach, contribution, and significance; (4) is innovative; (5) can be replicated or elaborated on in other contexts; and (6) can be peer reviewed.

These two uses of the term "scholarship" create problems in discussing and evaluating faculty work in academia. As the Sydnor, Commins, and Reyna article explores in this symposium, CER can make a valuable contribution to the teaching component of the first conception of scholarship. Likewise, research-related projects not meeting standards such as those that Diamond and Adam (2004) identified may fall under the service component of the first definition. This article, however, focuses on CER as "scholarship" meeting the second definition. Using this conception enables disciplines and institutions to identify engaged research projects and products that they should recognize and support as scholarly work.

DEFINING ELEMENTS OF CIVICALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH

Building on the relevant literature on the topic, the intensive week-long discussions held at the first American Political Science Association Institute on Civically Engaged Research (ICER) in June 2019, and our experience in public affairs, we define CER as the systematic and rigorous production of knowledge through reciprocal partnerships with people beyond the academy that contributes to the improved governance of social and political problems.

This definition is particularly informed by Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle's (2018) review of definitions of engaged scholarship from 48 different peer-reviewed publications; Sandmann, Furco, and Adams' (2016) 20-year retrospective on the engagement-focused literature; and Barker's (2004) taxonomy of engagement.[3] These works identify several key priorities of engaged research, including an emphasis on social justice, citizenship, high-quality scholarship, reciprocity between scholars and non-scholars, community needs, democratization of knowledge, boundary crossing, and public impact. Our definition has three key components that encompass these elements.

The first component is an understanding of research as the systematic and rigorous production of knowledge. Following Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle (2018), Barker (2004), and

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others, we view quality as one of the necessary characteristics of CER, particularly because research that is not rigorous has limited value for addressing public problems. Whether it follows a social scientific or humanistic form of inquiry, quality research conscientiously follows a documented, replicable method; adheres to research standards in a recognized framework; and is accountable to a community of researchers through peer review (Diamond 2002; Gelmon, Jordan, and Seifer 2013; McCormack 2011). We recognize, however, that peer-review processes may need to be adapted to the nature of CER.[4]

The second component of our definition is a focus on improving the governance of social and political problems. These problems are perceived gaps between an existing state of affairs (e.g., a community's well-being) and an alternative state that better achieves a community's desired outcomes. Governance—which most if not all political scientists recognize as a central concern of the discipline—refers to how institutions, resources, relationships, and power dynamics are arranged to encourage or discourage collective action toward public goals related to these problems. It encompasses all such arrangements, from immigrants forming a nonprofit community center to a government agency partnering with businesses to develop new vaccines. Although all scholars can conduct CER, political scientists are particularly well positioned to do so, given both the discipline's and CER's emphasis on governance.[5]

"Civically engaged" refers to the third defining component of CER's approach to research. The word "civic" has several roles—each one essential—in defining CER. "Civic" refers to research on problems that affect a community, defined as either a place-based community or any group of people facing shared challenges. Moreover, CER studies issues that are civic in that they can be addressed through understanding and altering institutions of governance. These "civic" institutions may be formal or informal and can range from government agencies to philanthropy and from changes in policy to changes in cultural norms. Also central to the civic nature of CER is the aspiration to contribute to social change; CER researchers are citizen–scholars addressing well-being across society (Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle 2018; Chambers and Gopaul 2010; Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011; Stoker, Peters, and Pierre 2015).[6] Through CER, they may be contributing to one or more of the four forms of civic engagement that Berger (2009) identified: affecting government action, participating in social associations, attending to and acting on moral codes and ethical reasoning, and contributing to the formation of civil society.

CER also is civically engaged because it intentionally coproduces new knowledge through a *reciprocal* partnership with actors outside of the academy. These partnerships may be with individual community members or with existing national or subnational government agencies, nonprofit organizations, or private businesses. CER may be conducted with local communities experiencing a problem firsthand or with organizations addressing the issue on a larger scale. Research partnerships may draw attention to a problem, assess a need or evaluate policies addressing it, or answer other questions identified with the community. The research also may lead to various tangible actions that may or may not involve the researcher, but the research must be based in reciprocity (Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle 2018; Glass and Fitzgerald 2010). For example, although it potentially makes a civic contribution, research that studies public opinion, political institutions, and public policy without such reciprocity is not CER.

Reciprocity, which ICER participants identified as an essential attribute of CER, demands the mutually beneficial, respectful, reflexive, and iterative consideration of all partners' needs and goals. It requires collaboration during the many phases that comprise research: identifying the problem or research questions, designing the research, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting and disseminating the results.[7] For complex projects, what constitutes reciprocal consideration and collaboration may take various forms at any stage, which are difficult to prescribe in advance and may range from requests for feedback to in-depth deliberations. They may be more intensive at the beginning and at the end of the project or when important questions arise. The iterative nature of most projects will require flexibility from all involved, and all participants should be learning from and responding to one another. Ultimately, the choices that all partners make should always be animated by a commitment to the democratization of knowledge production and distribution (Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle 2018; Brown et al. 2003).

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As Weiss (1979, 428) pointed out more than 40 years ago, the process by which knowledge is used to address public problems "is not one of linear order from research to decision but a disorderly set of interconnections and back-and-forthness that defies neat diagrams." Therefore, CER involves and results in mutual discovery and transfers of knowledge. It is this "back-and-forthness" of reciprocity that gives CER the potential to have a public impact *and* to make contributions to scholarly learning.[8]

CER AND OTHER RESEARCH–SOCIETY LINKAGES

CER can include many different approaches connecting academia with the public. These approaches go by many names, including community-based participatory research (Cargo and Mercer 2008), action research (Cassell and Johnson 2006;

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Lewin 1946), applied research (Bickman and Rog 2009), policy analysis (Weimer and Vining 2017), the work of consultants and "pracademics"[9] (McDonald and Mooney 2011), and scholar activism (Oslender and Reiter 2015). However, several criteria are worth highlighting for these efforts, and others, to qualify as CER.

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The first criterion relates to the level of engagement with actors outside of the academy. Engagement in research can range from no contact to limited consultations to shared decision making (Barker 2004; Doberneck, Glass, and Schweitzer 2011, 21; Key et al. 2019). Basic research indirectly inspired by—or that unintentionally informs—public problems, applied research that minimally engages with the populations that it affects, and policy analysis when it does not involve external partners are examples of low levels of engagement (Weiss 1979). Although we want CER to be perceived as a "big tent," sustained reciprocity throughout the research process is a required element to improve its relevance, impact, and validity. At a minimum, all partners should be involved at some level in each major phase of the process: design, implementation, and dissemination.

Of course, incorporating reciprocal partnerships in research, both conceptually and empirically, in all phases is difficult and time consuming (Cargo and Mercer 2008; Cassell and Johnson 2006; Hampshire, Hills, and Iqbal 2005; Mulligan and Nadarajah 2008). Sometimes more power lies with researchers who view themselves as "ready-made" experts, policy entrepreneurs, or scholar activists. In short, anyone who may have a pre-formed agenda may use their power to ignore or subvert the interests of the community—or resist understanding the context in which the problem arises. Likewise, academics who focus on research methods first and the problem second also risk distorting or avoiding community needs (Easton 1969; Stoker, Peters, and Pierre 2015). However, there also are situations when the nonacademic partner has more power. This can occur when a government agency, business, nonprofit organization, or grant-making foundation pays scholars to conduct research. The bottom line is that whenever the reciprocity of the relationship is severely limited—by any partner—the project is not CER.

A second necessary criterion is the sincere commitment to conducting research that matters for nonacademic actors. Whereas other connections between research and society may benefit the public, these benefits are not the immediate focus and may be in the future or diffuse if they occur at all. CER intentionally produces research for a certain type of (potential) result—that is, improved governance of a significant social or political problem. This distinction separates CER from participatory research that does not directly engage with civic problems and the effective governance of them. Likewise, policy research that does not place concrete efforts to improve governance at the center of the enterprise also is not CER. Studying a public problem is necessary but not sufficient for scholarly research to qualify as CER.

As the third criterion, scholarly rigor is an intrinsic component of CER in ways that it is not for other linkages between research and the needs of various publics. Research that is driven by policy makers' rhetorical or practical needs to deploy knowledge to buttress their own position and persuade their audience may not abide by the standards and expectations of scholarship (Weiss 1979).

As the fourth criterion, CER deliberately coproduces new knowledge. Scholars may share insights from academic research through op-eds, blogs, public speaking, and other forms of outreach, but this work often simply reports prior knowledge in a unidirectional manner.[10] Although these activities may be important parts of a complex CER project, which can be perceived as a portfolio of activities, such public-facing scholarship is not CER on its own.

As the fifth criterion, the scope of CER is wider than some research–society linkages. Given that it is not limited to partnering with place-based communities, CER is broader than some definitions of community-engaged or community-based participatory research (Cargo and Mercer 2008; Key et al. 2019; Mulligan and Nadarajah 2008), although it certainly can include them. Using this broad conception of CER, institutions should not define community and engaged research so narrowly that they ignore problems based on identity, shared interests, or problems that can—and sometimes must—be addressed at a scale larger than a neighborhood or a village. Although encouraging connections between "town and gown" is important, CER scholars should be empowered to choose freely the scale and scope of their work.

Given its focus on the governance of social and political problems and dedication to scholarly rigor, the political science discipline in particular should strongly support and encourage scholars who choose to incorporate CER into their research agenda.

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CONCLUSION

There are many ways of connecting scholarly research to problems facing society. Some have attributes that make them distinct from CER, but they all have an appropriate role in academia. Of course, given opportunity, capacity, and resource constraints, some ways are more suitable to particular contexts or moments in a scholar's career than others. In some cases, a more unidirectional approach that is civically inspired, generates civically relevant ideas, and broadly disseminates its results may be appropriate.

However, in other situations, an approach involving nonacademic partners in the research process is called for legitimately. Such approaches can open new vistas for scholars, improve the quality of inquiry, and serve the stated missions of higher-education institutions. For all of these reasons, scholars need the freedom to pursue and experiment with approaches to scholarship. Moreover, given its focus on the governance of social and political problems and dedication to scholarly rigor, the political science discipline in particular should strongly support and encourage scholars who choose to incorporate CER into their research agenda. ■

NOTES

1. The authors contributed equally to this article.
2. Of course, many employees sustain the contemporary college or university. Scholars, however, are distinguished from other employees by their role in creating and disseminating knowledge through teaching, research, and service.
3. The preface to this symposium discusses a definition of CER complementary to ours. Substantively, the definitions differ only slightly in breadth and orientation. Our goal is to provide political science and other disciplines with an inclusive characterization of research directed toward resolving social and political problems. Our definition emphasizes governance and reciprocity; however, it does not specifically highlight self-governance.
4. See the symposium introduction for ideas on how reviews of engaged research can be improved. See Michigan State University (2000) and Diamond and Adam (2004) for additional comments and suggestions.
5. Other articles in this symposium provide numerous examples of how political scientists can and are doing this work.
6. The fact that there are differences in beliefs regarding what action should be taken on a problem is no more a barrier for advancing CER than other differences that scholars have. The expectation in CER, as in other scholarly endeavors, is that by adhering to standards of inquiry, scholars advance understanding. As with the founding of the policy sciences and related fields, CER is based on the hope that understanding leads to principled and beneficial action (DeLeon 1997).
7. The process behind achieving reciprocity, which involves building trust and working through status differentials in collaborative research partnerships, is presented in more detail in the Udani and Dobbs contribution to this symposium.
8. The article by Jackson, Shoup, and Williams in this symposium further discusses these elements and their benefits.
9. "Pracademic" is a neologism combining "practitioner" and "academic."
10. How such coproduction can be fostered is a critical question that we cannot adequately address in this limited space. It is further examined in the Udani and Dobbs article in this symposium.

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