The Flagship 2030 strategic plan (2007) presents the vision of CU as “a dynamic global force for the nurturing and development of ideas, the expansion of the frontiers of knowledge, the conception of creative work, and the dissemination and effective application of those ideas, works, and knowledge” (p. 29, emphasis added). Despite the last clause of this sentence, our university generally does relatively little to support this goal, and tenure and promotion structure and incentives tend to de-emphasize public scholarship, often treating it as (or conflating it with) a service activity or simply dismissing it as a low-status research activity. This is the norm throughout American universities.

We fulfill our research obligations as tenure-track faculty through knowledge-building in its purest forms: publishing peer-reviewed research articles and books and conference papers, which reach an audience of our colleagues across the nation and the world. In some cases, that audience probably numbers in the single digits. Quite often, it doesn’t reach the triple digits. Some of my best work has, alas, met this fate. Yet, notwithstanding this limited reach, I continue to believe that this approach to scholarship is extremely valuable and should continue to be supported, rewarded and otherwise encouraged. My push here is for public scholarship—which attempts to build bridges from the knowledge-building conversation to parallel conversations taking place among non-researchers—to be similarly supported and rewarded.

Depending on our field, these non-researchers may include policy-makers, journalists, lawyers, community advocates, practitioners, and artists, as well as the broader public. When tenure-track professors work to translate and communicate the research base to these non-researchers, we often find ourselves unprepared, unsupported, and unrewarded. Our institution is well-designed to support the knowledge-building enterprise; it is much less prepared to support public scholarship.

The concept of public scholarship includes and overlaps with similar ideas: research translation, engaged scholarship, democratization of knowledge, knowledge transfer, and knowledge mobilization (Bennet et al, 2007; Burawoy, 2005; Delanty, 1998; Eatman, 2009; Graham et al, 2006; Hutchinson, 2011; Kecskes & Foster, 2013). As hinted at by this string-cite, this is an area that has already benefitted from a great deal of thought. Imagining America (hyperlink) has compiled extensive resources, on issues including the P&T process (see hyperlink). Such work is important because it helps us to think creatively about how public scholarship can be elevated within our systems.

I started learning about this issue because (a) I direct the National Education Policy Center, which regularly asks elite researchers across the nation to temporarily set aside their other research in order to write translational pieces—work designed to bring their research to the attention of a broader audience (to bridge the parallel conversations mentioned above), and (b) a couple years ago I served as program chair for a major conference where the theme was “Public Scholarship for Diverse Democracies: Making Education Research Matter.” As part of that event, we brought together deans of schools of education (or chairs of departments of education) to discuss how to better encourage and support public scholarship. Unsurprisingly, one theme that emerged is that faculty must work within the larger university’s structures and expectations.
In my role as director of the policy center, I have been heartened to find that the nation’s elite researchers in my field overwhelmingly want to see their work—and the overall body of high-quality research in their respective areas of expertise—effectively disseminated. In fact, many of these researchers have a powerful thirst to engage in public scholarship. For the most part, what keeps them from this work is their (lack of) training and their (lack of) supports. For younger, less established and untenured faculty, these obstacles are combined with tenure incentives.

This suggests changes in at least four areas of how the university functions. First, we should include research translation in the set of skills we give to our own PhD students. Second, we should provide professional-development opportunities to our current faculty. Third, we should increase our current supports in areas such as graphics designers, videographers, editors, and public-relations/communications who have skills to help our faculty reach a non-researcher audience. Finally, we should provide guidance to our campus-level decision-makers (e.g., VCAC) on how to measure the quality of public scholarship to elevate it the same level as more conventional research.

References


