

How to earn tenure while doing community-engaged scholarship

There is no magic formula to obtaining tenure while doing community engaged scholarship (CES) – research or teaching that engages the community in a meaningful way. There are many variables in action, and every situation is different. However, there are some practices and pieces of advice that may be useful. This information has been documented in the peer-reviewed literature, as well as expressed by tenured faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We’ve compiled some of that information as a resource here!



Research Topics

Not all topics will lend themselves to community-based research (CBR). Often, academics also complete “traditional” research in addition to their CBR, which can help boost your tenure portfolio. Scholars also consider a variety of things when determining how to successfully build their tenure package while doing CBR, including:

- Choosing a research topic that readily lends itself to CBR and is relevant to the community around the university, the academy, and funding agencies.
- Focusing on a persistent issue in which it is clear that the community will have a depth of knowledge.
- Working with a community that may otherwise be inaccessible.
- Using data in different ways to develop outcomes that are useful for both the community and the academy - in other words, community engagement is one piece of the research, and developing theoretical understanding might be another.
- Including scholarship on the mechanisms of CBR in your research.

Funding

Fortunately, CES is gaining a stronger foothold nationally and internationally, and this translates to increased funding. Because your record of obtaining funding can be important for the tenure package, building a strong case for your funding abilities through CES can be helpful. For NSF grants, this may mean focusing on the broader impacts piece of the grant proposal and highlighting that in your results.

The NIH now has increased funding for CBR projects, and researchers in the health field can take advantage of these funds. For smaller projects or scholars just getting started, it may be fruitful to pursue smaller grants and awards and work up to larger funds. At UW-Madison, the Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment is one such grant. At an entry level, the Morgridge Center for Public Service has an annual grant competition for funds to develop a community-engaged learning or research course, which could be useful in an integrated package.

Funding agencies often care a great deal about impact and sustainability, which are important parts of CBR projects. Focusing on outcomes and increased community capacity as a result of the project may be helpful in grant writing.

One challenge for obtaining funding for CES is the prolonged timeline that often comes along with these projects. It takes time to build relationships and get programs off the ground, and that extra time is important to keep in mind when pursuing funding.



Publications

The number and quality of peer-reviewed publications you have often play a major role in the tenure review process. However, the academic publishing field and process may not always value the results of CBR, so you must be creative when showcasing the results of your CBR work. Here are some ideas for how to do so:

- Work on group peer-reviewed publications when doing interdisciplinary work.
- Discuss other ways results have been disseminated, including information for communities, media coverage, and other nontraditional outlets. Document the impact of these findings, or numbers of people it reached.

- Promote your work in other ways (workshops, community presentations, social media, videos).
- Prioritize writing time to consistently schedule time to work on papers, even if it is only a short amount of time per day.
- Talk with your chair and mentors about the publications to focus on to publish as strategically as possible.
- Find new and different publication outlets, possibly outside your discipline



(Shameless!) Self Promotion

Depending on the tenure review policies of your department and college, you may have several other areas to highlight community involvement. These pieces may fit into several places, such as the career statement, curriculum vitae, and/or letters of support, and should be showcased whenever possible. Some of these include:

- Measureable outcomes of research
- Policy impacts from research
- General descriptions of all impacts of research
- Evidence for your national/international reputation in the field due to CES
- CES awards
- Incorporating CES into career statement
- Highlighting community activities on CV
- Letters of support from community members
- Press releases, news articles, TV/radio appearances

Appealing to Institutional Ideals

Many institutions of higher education are facing budget crunches, public disenchantment with academia, and the struggle to stay relevant. Some institutions, including the University of Wisconsin-Madison, are trying to mitigate these issues by highlighting their commitment to communities, public service, and engagement. These commitments can directly support your quest for tenure through CES practice. In your package, try to frame your work in terms of justifying the institution's existence as a knowledge-producer and disseminator collaborative institution and the institution's interest in successfully educating students and contributing to the larger community. Highlighting your community service piece and relating that back to the institution's larger goals can also be effective. If possible, mention the institution's strategic goals and relate your CES to the institution's attempts to foster community engagement and service.



Think Strategically

It is helpful to think about what your tenure package will look like from the beginning of your career - and how to incorporate CES along the way. Your department should have their own criteria stating the importance of CES, which will help you validate your community-engaged work and support your case as you frame your research in your package. Letters of support from experts in the field can validate these criteria, further strengthening your case that this work is important. The tenure review committee solicits input from other outside experts in your field of study, and these letters can be influential, too. Publishing strategically in journals and with publishing companies that will give you the highest impact possible can also help your case.

In addition to thinking strategically from the beginning, your tenure committee can also help determine the most important aspects to emphasize for the tenure committee, frame your research appropriately, and then help translate your work for the review committee. Your chair can set the stage for the review committee by being explicit about departmental expectations and how you've met them. Your chair can also remind your tenure committee (and then the divisional committee) that this work often takes more time than traditional academic research.

Use an Integrated Approach, if allowed in your division

The Social Studies Division now allows tenure packages to take an integrated form. This means that cases should demonstrate excellence in teaching, research, and service, and the three activities should be integrated and interrelated. In these cases, the package should demonstrate how the pieces are integrated and why that integration allowed for more robust impact. Impact is very important for the success of these cases, and there is flexibility in how impact can be interpreted (e.g. impact could be measured by citations, but it might be demonstrated in a nontraditional way, as well). Integrated cases need to be labeled as such from the beginning, so work with your chair to determine what will give you the strongest case.



Find your mentors and champions

Not everyone understands community-engaged scholarship, so it is important to find mentors who do and can support you through the tenure process. It is especially helpful if they have some institutional knowledge and memory to support you as you navigate the system. These mentors will help make your work more visible and understandable to the tenure committee. They will also understand the time and energy that goes into relationship-building and laying the groundwork for research partnerships. Once you utilize support from those kinds of people, your case should be stronger and more successful.

UW-Madison case studies

Here is some advice from several recently tenured UW-Madison faculty members about how they were able to achieve tenure.

Young Mie Kim, Journalism and Mass Communication

Young-Mie focuses on media and political communication, and used her community-based learning course (Technology for Social Change) as part of her tenure package.

Frame your community-based learning (CBL) course as a teaching innovation

CBL is considered a high impact practice and has numerous positive effects for students. Young-Mie's course brings students into the South Madison community to work on community-identified needs, and her course has been very positively received. In fact, it is meeting the department's needs so well that it is now officially part of the undergraduate curriculum. Such cases may be good examples to use during the development of the tenure package.

Discuss how your community-engaged work positively influences your research

Young-Mie was not trained in community engagement as a graduate student, so this work was new for her as a faculty member. However, her CES has positively influenced her research and scholarship, and Young-Mie discussed those positive outcomes in her tenure package. Additionally, Young-Mie was able to test various approaches in her courses, which led to peer-reviewed publications.

Use innovative approaches to assess outcomes

As Young-Mie was trying to assess the outcomes of her work, she had difficulty in determining how to accurately do so. To best describe her work, she wrote a case study that was able to focus specifically on her work and its impacts for students, scholars, and community members. In that case study, she was able to concentrate on the unique positive outcomes of CES, such as collaborative relationship building, multiculturalism, and long-term orientation. She also included letters of support from her community partners and students.

Brian Christens, Civil Society and Community Studies

Brian has a community psychology background and focuses on grassroots community organizing processes at multiple levels. As such, his research lies along various points of the CES spectrum, from traditional academic research to community-driven projects.

Focus on the integration of scholarship and service

Although Brian's tenure package focused more on his academic work than his CES work, when including community-based work, Brian tried to clearly tie it back into his scholarship. By thinking strategically about how to include his service work, Brian was able to show how his community work enhanced his research goals.

Understand others' levels of familiarity with CES

In his tenure package, Brian tried to focus on aspects of his work that his committee would be familiar with. Additionally, you can work to educate your committee about your work so they understand what it means and what it contributes. To those unfamiliar with CES, this may be a very useful step.

Focus on collaboration when doing CES

As anyone doing community-based work knows, CES can take more time and resources than traditional research. However, this process can be completed more smoothly when collaboration occurs. There are resources on campus, such as the Morgridge Center for Public Service, that have a wide range of partnerships with community organizations, and working with them can expedite the relationship-building process. Additionally, Brian advocates working in teams whenever possible to maximize productivity and craft the best possible projects. He works closely with graduate students, undergraduates, and other faculty and staff on projects to achieve maximum impact.

Sam Dennis, Jr., Landscape Architecture

Sam is also affiliated with Geography and Urban and Regional Planning. His work focuses on community outcomes from improvements to the built environment and often uses participatory design and planning.

Use each step of the research process to engage in disciplinary debates

Projects using community-based methods go through many different phases, and Sam advocates using each of those as an opportunity for study and publication. This will open up many more outlets for publication. He suggests remembering that every paper does not have to be extremely lengthy or submitted to the biggest journals, as well.

During the relationship-building process, be productive!

During one of Sam's projects, he spent over six months getting to know a community before they were even willing to engage with him, let alone begin a research project. While that time might initially seem unproductive, it can serve as a chance to reflect (and write!) on the effort to engage and the underlying theories behind this process and the upcoming research process. Thinking outside the publication box will help the engaged scholar produce more publications, even during seemingly quiet research time. You can also package that relationship-building time as service.

Connect with other engaged scholars

Make connections with other people doing similar work and learn from them! Reinventing the wheel is often an inefficient use of time. Make connections with those in your discipline who do the kind of work you do, and work to understand how they built their case for tenure. They will often provide solid advice for your own tenure case. For example, Campus Compact has a panel of CES experts who may be useful to connect to.

Armando Ibarra, School for Workers, UW-Extension

Armando's work focuses on Chican@/Latin@ working communities, adult education on issues of diversity in the workplace, international labor migration, leadership development, and organizing workplaces.

Focus on the relationships

CES can only be done with meaningful trust relationships, which take time, patience, and humility. This is simply a reality of the job. By focusing on the integrity of relationships, you can develop long-lasting partnerships and the potential to make important change. Although you might feel rushed or overwhelmed in the development of your tenure package, keep your focus on relationships. You are one piece of a larger effort to solve a problem.

Remember - this is a job

Just as you protect your time at work, remember to protect your life from work, too. CES is meaningful, important work that can consume a great deal of time. Armando tries to be mindful that his position is a regular job (even though it often doesn't feel like it!), which helps him create work-life balance. This helps him to defend his time at work, prioritize what needs to be done, and stay realistic about the scope of what he can do. It also helps him to focus on those pieces of the job that may feel less crucial, but are just as important.

Frame your job in a way to support your goals

As Armando said, "My job as a professional is to translate the lives of the working-class people so academics can understand them." As such, Armando is constantly balancing how to translate community knowledge into academic work while keeping the trust and respect of the people and organizations he works with. By framing his job in this way, he is able to help balance his community and academic commitments while doing his work with integrity.

Rebekah Willett, School of Library and Information Studies

Rebekah focuses on children's media cultures, including games, online activities, and story writing.

Integrate a community-engaged approach into your work

Rebekah has integrated community engagement into many parts of her academic life in an interdependent way. She offers teachings and trainings to public libraries, which helps her maintain her relationships with those organizations and individuals. She also supervises students doing independent studies in the libraries, which lets her keep tabs on the comings and goings at the library. The students are able to help her stay connected to spaces that are constantly changing within the library, which in turn helps her develop research ideas and projects with librarians.

Get departmental support

During her quest for tenure, Rebekah had the guidance and support of her department and department chair throughout. Knowing that she was heavily involved in community-engaged efforts, her chair helped to protect her time (e.g. ensuring she wasn't serving on too many committees, managing her teaching load) so Rebekah would have sufficient time for her scholarship.

Redevelop or broaden traditional definitions

In her work, Rebekah does a lot of teaching outside the classroom. For example, she leads workshops and professional development opportunities for librarians. In her tenure package, this was classified and defended as teaching, even though it may have initially fallen outside of the traditional scope of teaching.

Stephanie Robert, School of Social Work and Social Science Divisional Committee Chair (2015-17)

Stephanie Robert's research focuses on how social and economic aspects of people's lives affect their health and well-being over the life course, and she serves as the Chair of the Social Studies Divisional Committee, and therefore has great tips for obtaining tenure under the new integrated case guidelines.

Be as explicit as possible in your tenure package

Remember that your tenure review committee will not be very familiar with your discipline and its standards. Therefore, it's your job to simplify and clarify your work, its importance, and its impacts. You can also communicate with your letter writers to ensure they are discussing pieces of your work in the most helpful way possible. You, your chair, and your letter writers are the experts in your field - make your case with as much clarity as you can.

Getting tenure while doing CES takes more work – but can be done!

The academy is slow to change and relies on its traditional culture and way of doing things. That means faculty at R-1 institutions typically have to work harder to make the case for tenure with a CES package. However, the academy can only change if its faculty continue to stay involved in CES. Change may start at the departmental level, but broader institutional change can only happen if faculty continue to fight for it.

Be a steward for your own case

If there ever is a time for self-promotion, your tenure package is it! Sell yourself and your work. Stay up-to-date with what's going on in your field, as well as any changes at the institutional level. Maintain your connections so you can show that you have support from a wide variety of people in a multitude of ways.

Linn Posey-Maddox, Educational Policy Studies

Linn studies race, gender, and equity within family educational settings. Her work is inherently community-engaged and her research questions come from the context of the space she is in.

Engage along the spectrum

There are many ways to make your research more community-engaged. When Linn did not have the capacity to do a participatory action research project, she still used an engaged approach by focusing on research questions that were important to the community, producing products that were useful to the community, and made herself available as a resource to the community. Community-engaged work is not all or nothing.

Think about your activities with an integration lens

As a pre-tenure professor, your time will be stretched thin. Think about ways in which activities can serve several purposes. For example, teaching a community-based learning course might be a great way to get to know potential community partners for a future research project while also using a high-impact teaching practice. Developing a conference session around engaged scholarship may allow you to network with like-minded scholars while adding a presentation to your CV. Going to community meetings might result in getting to know guest speakers for a course you're teaching while also exposing you to opportunities to make future presentations for the community.

Be realistic about your capacity

In reality, work-life balance may not exist, but we can strive for synergy and integration. This requires us to be realistic about our time and the commitments we can reasonably take on. Flex your “no” muscle – this is hard, but important! You can't do everything, and by recognizing this, you will prevent yourself from overcommitting and being unable to follow through.

Aydin Bal, Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education

Aydin studies the interplay of culture and behavioral problems by studying cultural-historical constructions of deviance. He partners with schools to create Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

Remember - this is the research of the future

The academy needs to change to stay relevant with current paradigms and ways of thinking. This requires researchers to use interdisciplinary, responsive, community-engaged approaches in order to solve the complex and systemic issues of today. Community-based approaches represent this paradigm shift and are demanded by the issues of today. Over 80% of faculty nationwide are white, and many sectors of the academy suppress and marginalize oppressed communities. Community-engaged work breaks open these old traditions and exposes the knowledge production process by being honest about the complexity and messiness of research. This work is creative and rigorous, and it will find space in the academic world, but we may need to create those spaces ourselves.

Critically consider your commitment to the community

It is important to think critically about the communities we are serving. For example, if you are working with the schools, what community are you serving? Your community could be administrators, teachers, parents, students, outreach staff, and the list goes on. Your research may not make serve everyone's interests, so you want to consider to whom you are committing, who owns the research, and how community members are shaping the project and using results.

Exercise your creativity and gratitude

An engaged research approach may be new or novel in your field, and there may not be a roadmap. If you don't have a framework to follow, can you create one? Can you find spaces to publish outside of your primary field? Can you find a network of scholars who may be outside your traditional network? Think outside the artificial academic "boxes" that have been created. And along the way, recognize and appreciate the work of other community-engaged scholars. Our collective struggle is important.

Lori Bakken, Civil Society and Community Studies

Lori is an evaluation specialist with UW-Extension and works closely with community and non-profit organizations in her research and teaching. Her current interests relate to systems thinking, collective impact, transformative evaluation, and how systems theory and frameworks inform evaluation design.

Create a strong central thread in your work

Often, those doing CES are doing interdisciplinary work and publishing across different fields. This may limit their ability to publish in the leading journals. Therefore, it's important to be able to tie your work together with a thread of expertise. This will help you to justify why you are publishing where you are.

Take advantage of every resource available to you

Doing community-engaged work often takes more time than traditional research. Find ways to buy yourself more time whenever possible. Perhaps you can use grant funding to buy yourself out of teaching a course, or find a fellowship that will give you more time for your research. Take advantage of every resource you can, and use opportunities to make work relevant and “countable” in multiple areas when possible.

Steve Ventura, Soil Science and Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies

Steve's interest areas include community and regional food systems, bioenergy crops on marginal land, and developing tools for local land use planning. Steve's work is community-engaged in many ways, including participatory GIS.

Find excellent outside letter writers

There is no real role currently for outside evaluation of a scholar's work, except in appendices (although this may change in the future). Therefore, find outside letter writers who are familiar with CES and can speak to the impact of your scholarship.

Negotiate your starting package

If possible, negotiate several years of summer funding when you start your work. Summer can be a wonderful time to build relationships with community partners and give you some less-interrupted time to do community work. Ideally, negotiate for several years of summer funding when starting your position.

Earlise Ward, Nursing and Morgridge Center for Public Service

Known around Madison as the “community psychologist,” Earlise works with faith communities to develop culturally appropriate mental health programs. She is also the Faculty Director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service.

Diversify your funding portfolio

It takes good funding to do rigorous work. By diversifying your funding portfolio, you can prove your value as a scholar and show your relevance in multiple areas. Consider private foundations as well as large funding agencies. The ability to secure funding from multiple sources is an advantage in your tenure package.

Find support personnel for your research

If possible, negotiate funding to hire a research project manager. CES is labor intensive and you can't do it all by yourself. A professional staff member can make a big difference, even if they are part time. This model is often used in the health fields.

The Big Picture, according to UW-Madison faculty

Be proactive when promoting your CES work

Educate your department, other university employees, and your graduate students on the value of this work. Promote new and different ways of disseminating your information, take opportunities to talk about your research, and promote community events. As more and more excellent scholars talk about their CES work, it will become a more valued and respected form of scholarship.

Be true to yourself, your research, and your field

Try not to let the demands of the tenure process solely guide you. As you focus on your ideas about what's relevant and important in your field, meaningful work will naturally follow. Take the time to do the work, and allow space for the inevitable bobbles and turns of CES projects. When you have the trust of community leaders, you're able to get the root questions - and effect change. If it is CES that you are passionate about, you will do your best work pursuing it. You are the person who knows best what kind of scholar you want to become.