How to earn tenure while doing community-engaged scholarship

There is no magic formula to earning 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). CBR will only have the kinds of impacts that tenure reviewers want to see if the research problems and context were a good fit for CBR, and if the research was designed well. It’s not uncommon for researchers to use several modalities depending on the topic and context. 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 be reticent to working with researchers with research approaches other than CBR.
• 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. Funding can be critical to your ability to conduct the work (e.g., paying your time and the time of your community partners, colleagues, and students; paying participants or providing resources to community partners; funds for transcription or other research tasks and materials). Your record of obtaining funding can be also important for your tenure and promotion applications, depending on the particular criteria in your unit. As such, obtaining funding for CES research can not only help you conduct the research, but it can demonstrate that others find your work valuable and can build a case for your ability to garner funding for your work moving forward.

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 engaged in work that seeks to improve or promote health can propose work – particularly built around CBR) frameworks – for these highly competitive 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 (see page 5).

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, academic institutions and the academic publishing field and process are uneven in the value placed on CES research across fields, so you may have to be creative when showcasing the results of your CBR work. Here are some ideas for how to do so, noting that some of these recommendations would apply to all those on the tenure-track, but bear particular consideration by engaged researchers, since their work may not conform to norms in some disciplines:

- 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 only short amount of time per day.
- Talk with your chair and mentors about the publications to focus on to publish as strategically as possible.
- Publishing strategically in journals that will give you the highest impact possible can also help your case.

(Shameless!) Self Promotion

Depending on the tenure review policies, requirements, and standards of your department and college, you may have many different ways to highlight the impact and quality of your CES work beyond publication. 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
- Including 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. Highlighting your community-engaged work and relating it 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 may be 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 its own tenure criteria for its faculty, or guidelines regarding how quality and impact are assessed. These criteria may include statements about the importance of CES, which may help reinforce the importance of your community-engaged work and support your case as you frame your research in your package. If your department does not have these criteria, work with your colleagues to develop them or make sure you understand how your work will be assessed as consistent with your departmental norms, goals, and mission. Letters of support from experts in the field can strengthen your case that this work is important. The tenure review committee solicits input from other outside experts in your field of study, and often you have some say in recommending who these external letter writers might be. Make sure to provide recommendations of strong scholars who value CES work.

In addition to thinking strategically from the beginning, your tenure committee can also help determine the most important aspects to emphasize for the reviewers, frame your research appropriately, and then help translate your work for the reviewers. Your chair can set the stage for the review committee in their cover letter 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 some other types of research.
Use an Integrated Approach, if allowed in your division

At UW-Madison, the Social Science and Biological Science Divisional Committees allow tenure packages to be framed as “integrated cases”. Instead of separately documenting excellence in research and in teaching or service as is usually done, in some circumstances it makes more sense to argue that a tenure candidate has integrated research, teaching, and service in ways that are not separable, and that make a contribution that demonstrates excellence in ways that are bigger than the separate parts. 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 activities 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 are strongest when they are labeled as such from the beginning. Work with your chair and/or promotion committee and mentor to determine whether this option is available to you, what the details are for this option, and whether this option is appropriate for you.

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. 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.
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 research initiated to answer theoretical questions to community-driven projects.
**Focus on the integration of scholarship and service**

Although Brian’s tenure package focused more on his impact in the scholarly literature than his engagement with community groups, when including community-based work, Brian tried to clearly tie it back into his scholarship. By thinking strategically about how to include his engaged work, Brian was able to show how his community work complemented 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. Issues that concern community partners are rarely neatly confined to a single academic discipline or area of expertise. He therefore often collaborates with graduate students, undergraduates, and faculty and staff from other disciplines on projects in pursuit of greater 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 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’s research focuses primarily on children’s media cultures, including games, online activities, and story writing. Her research also includes work with public libraries.

**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. All of these aspects of Rebekah’s work are important for keeping her teaching current and relevant.

**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 Science 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 a tenure review committee outside of your department or school (e.g., Divisional Committee at UW-Madison) may not be very familiar with your discipline and its standards. Therefore, it’s your job and that of your department to simplify and clarify your work, its importance, and its impacts. You and your department can craft language in your research statement and in their tenure letter that situates your work within the
mission of the department/school and demonstrates why the quality and impact of your work are consistent with the mission and standards of your unit. Also, when your materials are sent to external letter writers, your chair or promotion and tenure committee can tell the reviewers what the standards and values of your unit are, and explicitly ask the reviewers to assess the CES aspects of your work, and/or the integrative nature of your research, teaching, and service. 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. The inclusion of “integrated cases” in the tenure review at UW-Madison in two of the divisions demonstrates one step forward in finding ways to appropriately value and assess CES.

**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.