Episode 1 What is University Public Engagement Transcript

**David Weerts**

Where are we uniquely situated at this time and place to do something important with community partners for the common good?

**Makeda Zulu**

Hello and welcome to Rules of Engagement, a show that highlights the projects and partnerships of the University of Minnesota. Robert J. Jones Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center, which reports to the Office for Public Engagement. In today's episode, we will discuss the Office for Public Engagement with David Weerts Professor and Faculty Director for the Office for Public Engagement at the University of Minnesota.

**Makeda Zulu**

It's good to have you here.

**David Weerts**

Thanks for having me. Great to be here.

**Makeda Zulu**

Can you please tell us a little bit about yourself?

**David Weerts**

Sure. I'd be pleased to do that. So a little bit about myself. I have been here at the University of Minnesota for about 15 years now, and I'm a professor in our College of Education, Human Development. And kind of my story that I've gotten into this area of public engagement is for several years, I was just really interested in the broader purposes of higher education in society and thinking about these ideas of how can we really bring together universities with community communities in a mutually beneficial way so that everyone benefits and that institutions thrive, communities thrive, and we can all work together in a more collaborative way.

So that brought me to a lot of the research that I do. I had a history before that of raising money as a major gifts officer at the University of Wisconsin and also here at Minnesota. So what was fascinating about that is meeting with donors who had a big public vision for...

**Makeda Zulu**

Yeah, right. That's good.

**David Weerts**

…what higher education is about. And their transformational giving was really around these big ideas. So that's kind of what drives me in the work that I do and my connection to work with the Office for Public Engagement on the faculty side.

**Makeda Zulu**

That is fantastic. I had forgotten about being a program officer and making money for people.

**David Weerts**

Yes.

**Makeda Zulu**

Yes. Well, that's a fantastic background.

**David Weerts**

I was funny, you know, one of the early pieces of advice I got from a senior leader, and this was our very young days. He said, you know what? It will never hurt you in your career if you learn how to raise money for the university. And so that's followed me, because some of that work has been helpful in different centers that I've supported in different things.

So that was good early advice when I was a young 23 year old.

**Makeda Zulu**

23.

**David Weerts**

Right.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. Because you're only about 25 now.

**David Weerts**

I'll take it. Well, thank you. I don't I don't know about that. Every day is a, you know, a gift. So we'll take what we got, okay?

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. And I know we have a short time, but can you talk a little bit about how those skills have transferred to the work that you do now?

**David Weerts**

Yeah, I think that's probably the biggest piece of it is when I was doing the fundraising work, I worked across several different kinds of colleges with several different ideas about the work that they were doing and different kinds of donors with different ideas about what they wanted to do. And I think working with various communities and various stakeholder groups, there's this notion of boundary spanning across these various groups who have very different ideas about how the work should be done and what's the broader purposes of higher education.

So I think I've seen myself as somebody who's been able to cross those boundaries and to be able to say, how do we bring productive agreements together for the common good for all. So I think that's how it helps.

**Makeda Zulu**

I agree. I mean, I can see that, especially when I think of universities and how they function and sometimes how people are developed as researchers to be kind of single minded, to focus in their area of expertise. And so sometimes it's hard to cross those boundaries. So you already knowing how to do that, I think is fantastic.

**David Weerts**

Well thanks.

**Makeda Zulu**

You're welcome. The Office for Public Engagement has been a driving force. Can you share a little bit about that office?

**David Weerts**

Yeah. So the office… What's fascinating about this particular office is it was really the vision of a number of folks in the mid early 2000, I would say. Robert Jones, as you mentioned Bob Bruininks others during that time who really saw a broader way to think about the relationship between the university and the state and the broader society.

I would say that prior to that, a lot of institutions were thinking about public engagement, but really more maybe in project based work. So it was maybe a series of projects he would do for the public good with community, which is great, but it really wasn't around institutional transformation, which is really what this office is about.

It's transformation in the sense of, you know, we do these projects, but it's really about rethinking our identity as an institution to be a publicly engaged institution. And so what that means then is our office has a lot of different functions where we work across colleges and departments and units and faculty to say, how do we advance this work in a way that it gets rewarded, that it's high quality, it's done in a way that reciprocity and mutual benefit with community so that people see themselves and the institution sees itself as an engaged institution.

And we think about this more broadly across the system too, because we are a system wide office. So we're supporting the five campus system of the university. So we played a role in supporting various institutions on their journey toward this transformation.

**Makeda Zulu**

That's fantastic and, I think, important when I think of the support or… that we get from the state. I think they're looking for our publicly engaged work. At the same time, we're a research one university. Are there tensions there between being publicly engaged and being a research one university?

**David Weerts**

Well, it's interesting and a really important question, something that's been on the mind of folks for many, many years about this, especially these institutions are in fact…it's funny. So I teach a course on administration and leadership in higher education and the way that these institutions are talked about. Research institutions are called the organized anarchy. And there's a and there's a whole understanding about that, because it's to say that these are kind of loosely affiliated colleges and faculty are what they call kind of a cosmopolitan faculty is some some of the and in the sense that they see they're in some cases, their loyalty more to their disciplines than the institution or the, you know,broader needs. So it's a challenge for these institutions as they think about especially local commitments and how they think about their own scholarship, especially in the rewards area, because a lot of our thinking about the Twin Cities campus now, you know, really, really the main push is around a peer reviewed scholarship in terms of people's promotion and tenure.

So we have to be creative and supportive in ways that we can bring folks together across units and with communities in ways that support community needs, but also make sure that these faculty will be around to see the next round and are tenured and successful in their careers. So it is a challenge.

**Makeda Zulu**

It is a challenge. And so how do you meet that challenge?

**David Weerts**

So great segway to a lot of things that we're involved with in the office. So my area is around as a faculty director for academic planning and programs. So I kind of in my role and am sort of the academic officer, I guess, of the office in the sense that I support faculty as they're thinking about from early career all the way through kind of late career in their development as community engaged scholars.

So a couple of examples I would give is so when there are new faculty that come to the university, we try to get there early and often in terms of orientation. We have a table out there and we talk to many folks. In fact, this is really growing and people are very interested to do community engaged work. So we explain the set of services like consultations, but also workshops that we do.

Some examples of those that we offer are developing and applying partnership principles. So how do you create authentic partnerships with communities and think about entering into those arrangements, increasing the impact of research through public engagement. So thinking broadly about how they leverage this in ways that are impactful for contribution to the field, but also to the community fundamentals of community engaged teaching and learning.

So this is also another important piece as it's in addition to the research. We also think about the teaching agenda in the service learning and other kind of engaged methodologies for teaching and support in that area. And then I think the really big piece that we work on is a series of workshops around community engaged scholarship and promotion and tenure.

Right? And that's kind of what I was alluding to is, you know, faculty are on this, the seven year probationary kind of track where they have various checkpoints along the way. And it's a high stakes decision after that when you're in year six, because, you know, because you could be voted off the island after, as they would say.

So one of the things that's been I think we're really proud of and innovative in kind of University of Minnesota, I would say leadership in this area is what's called the review Committee for Community Engaged Scholarship. Okay. I'm going to tell you real quickly about this. So one of the big things that we have related to this committee is faculty, when they are going up for promotion and tenure, they're required to have external letters to talk about the quality of their work.

So many times these are Big ten peer institutions, other folks, you know, from other institutions coming together to weigh in their work. But what we've established this review committee is a group of very prominent engaged scholars at our own institution that have really demonstrated expertise internationally in this work. And they provide a supplemental review for these scholars that they look at their work.

There's a rubric they look at and they write an assessment about the quality of their community engaged work. And the reason they do that is because some departments are supportive of community engagement but are not exactly sure how to evaluate it.

**Makeda Zulu**

Right.

**David Weerts**

So the purpose of this review letter is for candidates to have another opportunity for really high end folks doing this work to be able to talk about the quality of that work. So this has been something that started about four years ago. We have this coming year, three or four folks who are going to go up on that for four candidates.

And we found this to be very helpful for people's processes, for their file in their promotion process.

**Makeda Zulu**

Well, I think that I think that's important and fantastic for faculty, too, to have that as a support for them. I also believe that there are some points that they get as they are reviewed each year. You've maybe helped enhance the tenure code.

**David Weerts**

Is that. Yeah. So one of the things that's happening, I would say, and prior to that as well, as I went on to say, that this is done in partnership with the Vice Provost for academic and faculty.

**Makeda Zulu**

Fantastic.

**David Weerts**

So that's an important point to make and in the sense that there's some shared leadership around this that's been Rebecca Ropers, who's been really terrific over the past several years working with Andy Furco, who is our previous vice president. And so I've really been fortunate to come alongside them and then continue this work in this area. But you're right, in terms of the promotion and tenure code, what's very interesting, again, the organized anarchy on this theme is public engagement at the university is seen in a variety of different ways across all of these colleges and departments. In fact. So I referenced Rebecca and Andy, a few years ago they did an assessment of these tenure codes called the 712 Statement. That's the statement that we call it, but they found 36 proxy terms for how people actually described public engagement.

So social responsibility, civic engagement, public leadership, public intellectualism, all of these kind of things. So what we have to be very attuned to is how these disciplines and fields and various traditions of understanding the public good in these fields come to understand this work. So within these promotion tenure codes, the idea is we support faculty to think deeply about what does it mean in their particular domain around public engagement.

So in this kind of research university system, it's really very faculty driven. So a lot of our work in our office is just to support and come alongside, help people make sense of what this work is, and then kind of shepherd people along in this process.

**Makeda Zulu**

Well, so so as I think about that, and I think that's fantastic that you're coming alongside and and helping the faculty, I'm also thinking about the departments and for those departments that are not yet embracing engagement, they may, they may woo right faculty to come and be a part of their their community. But then not support the very work that they call them there to do.

How do you help faculty members with that?

**David Weerts**

Yeah, that's a very tricky situation. And that happens. Because I think and the other part of that, which is important to note, is the future generations of faculty in their current. They really want to do this work. Okay? And I think it's an asset to think about that we could transform in a way that we could be the institution of first choice for great faculty members to do this.

But you're right, I think one of the things that we sometimes have challenge with is even with this review process that I mention is there's kind of almost like the Goldilocks, you know, too hot to call. Right? So we have some departments that they're like, well, you don't even need this review committee because everybody in our department supports this work.

So, you know, game on, let's go. Right. But then on the other end is what you're describing of departments who say this is not really what we do. Right. You know, we're kind of bench scientists. You know, we're not involved with this kind of work. We see our work in very different ways. So in our particular office, you know, we we've kind of been sticking with the coalition of the willing if you're open to that metaphor, whereas in some cases when people are in those, you know, least supportive departments, we we try to typically at the invitation of chairs and others, help them make sense about this as scholarship at this work is scholarship because

I think what happens in departments is they tend to throw this in the outreach bucket and they say, well, this is just, you know, outreach of what we're doing. But when you look at the quality of the work, this is scholarship. And so part of it is helping the candidate to make a case for the work that's done in community.

But in cases where community is helping to form the research questions, helping in some cases to, you know, collect data, interpret the findings, you know, working together to say, what does this mean and what do we do about it? And I think what we also try to counsel candidates is to show how is the field or your discipline better because of the research you're doing with community.

So what wrinkles of knowledge are we learning from community partners in a way that it's completely off the radar? If you're running big datasets or whatever it is that does not have community voice, That's the sweet spot of contribution that we try to help in those cases that are difficult.

**Makeda Zulu**

I also know that yet so I know you do some workshops and you do large trainings. I think you have an engaged academy. What else do you want to tell us about your work?

**David Weerts**

Yeah, so one of the things that's been a really fun and gratifying part of my career over the years is since 2008, I've been part of what's called the engagement academy for university leaders. And what this is all about is it was started by a group of partners across several associations, national associations. Now it's called Association of Public Land Grant Universities engagements, Scholarship Consortium, Campus Compact.

There's all of these associations that are kind of broadly interested in this work. But at that point, around 2008, there was a concern that there was really not an executive training academy for how people lead through a public engagement lens. So I was connected. What was fun for me as I was, I was just starting as assistant professor, but I was brought in by the giants of the field who were former presidents and others.

And so I'm so grateful for that opportunity. And I think what was interesting, this gets back to my fundraising life before, is I was unique in that I came out of the development office, right, Which was odd. But then I also did research in this area and I became a faculty member. So my contribution then was to think about how do we consider this work in a resource development frame in that way.

So fast forward, we've trained I believe it's about 170 plus campuses across four continents. We did something in Newfoundland, Canada last year was a three day event. So this is kind of becoming international. So that's really been a neat part of the work. And the people you meet are amazing around the world doing this kind of work. So that's been a really cool thing to be a part of.

**Makeda Zulu**

And I love that you do that because I think that, you know, the coalition of the willing, you know, at your university is one place, but then to see that people are doing it in other countries and how they do it, you know, whether it's I like to say, from the rooter to the tooter and it sounds like.

Is it Newfoundland? Yeah, Newfoundland. It sounded like they did it from the rooter to the tooter from the time you showed up.

**David Weerts**

Yeah. What's fascinating about that is in those particular contexts, in these cultural contexts, to see the fascinating cultural history that drives their work. So I think in that sense, you know, hearing the unique Newfoundland story around that, their heritage and who they are and then how they thought about, in this case Memorial University as an engaged institution in this area of Labrador, Newfoundland.

And, you know, the history of the sea and the fishing and what they did in World War II and all of this cool stuff. But I think that's the neat thing about it, is that these are very rooted in place, these ideas. And so and I don't know with the router to the device that I mean what you.

**Makeda Zulu**

You did.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. Yes, you did. Have you ever heard that term?

**David Weerts**

I haven't. So I was winging it.

**Makeda Zulu**

So. well, you know, people who grew up on farms. Okay.

**David Weerts**

My wife would know.

**Makeda Zulu**

Your wife probably would. You know, they try to make use of every part of an animal. right. From the router to the ice. So. All right, So we've learned something new today.

**David Weerts**

You're absolutely.

**Makeda Zulu**

Right. We've learned a lot of things. What else? What else do you want to tell us about your work? What drives you? What keeps you motivated as you do this work?

**David Weerts**

Well, I think I'm excited about is thinking about Minnesota as a state and the possibilities for scaling this work even more than we do across the system campuses. Because if we think about the challenges of our state and our region in a lot of different ways of things that are happening, I really, you know, hearken back to as a graduate student when this this reading around Ernest Boyer, who was kind of the guru back then, writing about scholarship, reconsidered.

And he said it, he had this quote that always stuck with me and the effect of I have this sense of what we need for the U.S. is for higher education is not more programs, but actually a larger sense of purpose in the nation's life. And I think about that as powerful is something of what we're about.

And we especially in the times that we're living in with a lot of challenges that that it's you know, certainly it's on podcast and all of that. But we think about where are we uniquely situated in this time and place to do something important with community partners for the good of the common good. So that's what gets me excited to get up in the morning.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. I also know you do a little bit of work around faith and universities coming together.

**David Weerts**

Yes.

**Makeda Zulu**

So across faiths.

**David Weerts**

Yes. So one of the things I was thrilled is that you were on a webinar with us. We do some work in the area of how various faith communities come together for the public good in these particular areas. So we had a grant from Interfaith Youth Core this past couple of years to do some work on this and bring together across different theological traditions and various faith communities to say, how do we work, you know, across these traditions and ways that we honor people's backgrounds in ways that, you know, really bring purpose and meaning to people's work together in the community.

**David Weerts**

So that was really fun to have that this past fall. So thinking about the folks who are represented on that, you're self included. So I wanted to mention that for folks. So as a way for that we could maybe link back for people to have to watch the video.

**Makeda Zulu**

Well, I was not most excited about my participation, but there was I was I think you think I was excited that, you know, one of our first deep conversations was about about faith and how that can be integrated into these conversations, because we were having because we are in such a polarized state right now. So I really enjoyed that first conversation.

But then actually, during that webinar, just hearing from the other folks on the panel, you know, just kind of walking into what I would say, the belly of the beast, right? At times with how people were feeling about different faiths. So the other part that I'm thinking about is that a lot of the federal, not foundations, but federal government is also looking for engagement to be a part of what researchers are doing.

And they've developed it more saying that they want engagement. But a lot of times the timing is a little off. Can you talk a little bit about how faculty are addressing that or what you see as questions people have or how you feel about that change over time?

**David Weerts**

Yeah. So I think one of the main drivers of some of this work early on was a National Science Foundation's work where they talk about broader impacts, became a one of the things that was required for a grant, successful grant applications and broader impacts really refers to how is this research really making a difference in to the for the public good for a broader way?

So I think in that particular sense it was interesting because that was a driver for a lot of folks getting back to the fundraising thing and as people say, different. How do we do this public engagement? We need to do it for our grant, right? So unwittingly or wittingly, that actually brought people to the table around to say, well, we need to think about this more carefully.

So I think in that sense you're right, you know, niche and these other federal foundations and groups that are funding this, they do have their set of timelines that come together at different points. I think what we think about probably in this space is the notion from moving from projects to partnerships with communities. Yes. And so in that sense, you're not all of a sudden at the last minute putting together an RFP with a new group of people like, can we find some people to do this work?

So you're having this a long term relationship that you're building over time and there's different discussion about, you know, different levels of the relationship and how do you cultivate that and make this authentic. So I think the thought is when those opportunities come right, come up and you have grant opportunities, is that there's people kind of already involved in this in a way that they're ready to work together on this if it's appropriate.

So I see that we've been doing some work with the county related to this too, and developing. In fact, one of my colleagues calls shovel ready faculty.

**Makeda Zulu**

Shovel ready.

**David Weerts**

In the sense of, you know, that they're shovel ready to work with community partners in an authentic way. So I think that's something that with these timelines, with the federal grants are important, but that's certainly an area that needs more help as well that we can work out.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. Well, thank you. That's really good to hear. And as we come to a close, if you know whether I'm a new faculty member or I'm listening in across the country somewhere, how do I get in touch with you? How do I learn more about the work you do? And if anything else you'd like to share?

**David Weerts**

Yeah, great. So our Office for Public Engagement, University of Minnesota, easily “Googleable”,My email address would be right on there if you go to *about us*. would be right on there. It's David Weerts and it's dweerts@umn.edu. W-E-E-R-T-S. that's the Dutch slash German spelling of it. There's still a dispute about where the background is but we're easy to get a hold of and be happy to talk to folks about this. So but thank you so much for having me on. It's really been an honor to participate today.

**Makeda Zulu**

All right. And hopefully we'll have you back.

**David Weerts**

Excellent. Thank you.

**Makeda Zulu**

You can learn more, As you just heard about the Office for Public Engagement and Faculty director David Weerts I want to say a special thanks to him for being here on today. And a special thanks to Nina Shepherd with the Office for Public Engagement and UROC She is the senior communications director. to learn more about UROC and our many community partnerships. Visit UROC.UMN.EDU. That is U-R-O-C dot U-M-N dot E-D-U.

Today's episode was produced by Blackbird Revolt, engineered by Stan Tekiela edited by Jordon Moses.

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