

Institutional and Structural Isolationism Within and Among Land-Grant Universities: Chronic Maladies Impacting Community Engagement That Demand Long Overdue Remedies of Relief

Stephen M. Gavazzi

The two seasoned and knowledgeable coeditors of this special issue—A. Scott Reed and Louis E. Swanson—have set before us a selection of exemplary scholarship efforts that go a long way toward recognizing the “persistent challenges” and “black swan events” that have disrupted or currently stand in the way of the fullest realization of the 21st-century mission of universities, land-grant and otherwise. In turn, the coeditors have also curated several articles that describe innovative ways university personnel can connect more effectively with communities (and with each other) in the face of such stumbling blocks.

Taken together, these articles stand as a remarkable testament to the past, present, and possible futures of university involvement in community engagement activities. What may be a bit more elusive, however, is a clarification of the root causes that lie beneath the host of vexing issues addressed by this area of scholarship. Therefore, one modest contribution of this closing essay involves the more specific naming and application of two fundamental problems faced by university personnel—more specifically, those within land-grant universities—who are committed to the community engagement mission: institutional isolationism and structural isolationism. Here, I will make the case that we have institutionally isolated outreach and engagement units from the mainstream of university business and concurrently have structurally isolated land-grant institutions from each other through inequitable funding.

Based on over a half-century of experiences within land-grant universities as both a student and faculty member, I concluded long ago that land-grant universities invariably suffer from what one might call “institutional isolationism.” Like its cousin terms “institutional sexism” and “institutional racism,” institutional isolationism implies the existence of a set of values so ingrained in the local culture that they are often seen as merely “the way things are” or “the way that

business is conducted.” As applied to the topic at hand, a working definition is offered as follows: institutional isolationism exists within any land-grant university to the extent that certain policies, practices, and norms work in various and often reinforcing ways to perpetuate inequities among the tripartite land-grant mission components of teaching, research, and community engagement. It is almost axiomatic to state that community engagement is valued the least of the three within and among land-grant universities, especially when compared to the reward structure that incentivizes research activities.

In turn, my recent work on the “land grab” foundations of land-grant universities (Gavazzi, 2021) has raised awareness of inequities related to the “structural isolationism” that exists among the three groups of land-grant institutions: the so-called 1862 land-grant universities created through the first Morrill Act, the 1890 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) founded through the second Morrill Act, and the 1994 Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) established by the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act. Again, a working definition is offered here for further consideration: structural isolationism involves the continuous and compounding impact of differential access to resources that systematically privileges 1862 land-grants over their 1890 counterparts and further benefits both of those groups in comparison to the 1994 Tribal Colleges.

The funding disparities between 1862 and 1890 land-grants have been well-documented (Lee & Keys, 2013), as has the even greater plight of funding among the 1994 land-grants (Martin & Hipp, 2018). While the structural isolationism perpetuated by these funding disparities is not specific to community engagement efforts, it cannot help but have a substantial impact on the various ways these distinct land-grant university groups are able to carry out the engagement

component of their mission. To provoke some necessary reflection on these problematic issues, the remainder of this final article applies the framing concepts of institutional isolationism and structural isolationism to various points raised in several (but not all) articles contained within this special issue. Additional articles are also suggested to contain certain remedies of relief from the chronic maladies associated with both forms of isolationism.

The introductory remarks of the guest editors themselves provide ample warning that engagement is “struggling” (p. 2), even while allowing that Pruitt’s “Roadmap to the Future of Engagement” projects an image of “well-founded optimism” (p. 2). Yet even Pruitt himself explicitly recognizes the ongoing devaluation of engagement in comparison to teaching and (especially) research efforts, which is a critical indicator of institutional isolationism at play within the land-grant institutions. Based on this acknowledgment alone, it truly is hard to imagine the reward structure of the land-grant university being altered in any fundamental way now or in the immediate future, notwithstanding the recent growth in the number of institutions receiving a Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement.

For public universities in general, we cannot pretend that a voluntary designation reflecting excellence in engagement holds much (if any) weight when compared to the involuntary Carnegie research classifications or even the Carnegie degree-granting classifications (also compulsory).

When research is the coin of the realm within the land-grant institutions and at many public universities, everything else simply pales in comparison. Hence, much work remains to combat the structural isolationism that degrades the importance of other aspects of the mission, including, of course, the value placed on community engagement. This may be most important in terms of how faculty members who have invested themselves in engaged scholarship (or may express the wish to do so) are hired and subsequently retained. Stated more succinctly, I will come to believe more wholeheartedly in Pruitt’s vision of a “very bright future” (p. 3) when (and only when) land-grant and other public universities start to recruit and promote faculty members based primarily on the excellence they have displayed in the arena of engagement.

In comparison to Pruitt’s contribution, the article written by the special editors themselves on “Transdisciplinary Engagement” is much more

tempered in its assessment of how community engagement efforts are regarded within land-grant universities. Specific attention is given to the unique constraints faced by Extension services at this moment in time, including, most poignantly, the self-defeating limitations imposed by their continued existence inside of colleges of agriculture. Here is another prime example of structural isolationism, one that defies all logic in terms of a 21st-century strategy for meeting the needs of our nation’s citizens. Efforts undertaken by agricultural colleges remain almost exclusively focused on aspects of the rural landscape, even while 80% of the U.S. population presently resides in suburban and urban areas.

Why, then, do we witness so many land-grant universities continuing to operate their Extension services within a centuries-old framework that was developed when most American families still resided in farming communities? Seen in this light, the transdisciplinary engagement called for by Reed and Swanson will be extremely difficult to enact in such siloed environments, to say the least, if such structural isolationistic tendencies are allowed to remain intact. As one remedy of relief, Extension programs must be relocated out of agricultural colleges and into campus-wide entities such as offices of academic affairs. Then and only then will the message be transmitted that Extension activities are the province of the whole university and not only the agricultural sector.

Looking elsewhere in this issue, the contribution by Kowalkowski and colleagues regarding Tribal land-grant institutions provides readers with a raw glimpse of structural isolationism in operation:

The 1994s receive woefully inadequate federal support to administer their land-grant programs. In fiscal year 2021, funding for their instructional services averaged about \$129,000 annually per institution, Extension funding averaged \$243,000, and research funding averaged \$114,000 (NIFA, 2021). With such meager funding, 1994s combine their federal support with other funding sources and integrate programming across disciplines and functional areas to achieve greater efficiency and impact. (p. 4)

That 2021 NIFA report cited by the authors contains dollar amounts that parallel an earlier report of FY2015–FY2019 funding at the federal

level by Croft (2019), both of which paint a startling picture of resource imbalances that contribute to structural isolationism. In general, for every \$100 in funding received by 1862 land-grants, the 1890 land-grants receive \$10, while the 1994 land-grants receive only \$1 (no, that is not a typographical error, it is between 1–2% of the total).

Kowalkowski et al. go on to state that the 1994 Tribal Colleges and Universities have created “need-based, transdisciplinary, cross-functional, and holistic” (p. 3) community engagement strategies—desirable qualities for any land-grant university to emulate—despite these resource inequities. This is possible because, among other things, the Tribal institutions and Tribal communities take their covenant with one another very seriously. Given the holistic commitment made by both institution and community, one can only imagine how incredible the Tribal work might become if it were properly funded. One might also ponder what reciprocally beneficial engagement activities might develop if more mainstream institutions of higher learning and their community stakeholders took their covenants with one another more seriously.

Martin and Steele’s “Harnessing Potential: The Role of Public and Land-Grant Universities’ Commitment to Engagement” showcases the APLU’s Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) designation, which offers a welcome focus on the connection between community engagement and economic development. I have argued elsewhere that the IEP designation represents a significant advancement in institutionalizing community engagement within the scope of work taken on by public universities (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). This APLU-led process for recognizing excellence in engagement demands that applicant institutions submit evidence in the form of testimonies from the very partners they are seeking to engage.

Interestingly, Martin and Steele begin their article with an acknowledgment of the “land-grab” nature of land-grant institutions. More specifically, they state: “While this tarnished history is not a focal point of this article on engagement, each land-grant university must review, acknowledge, and address these past events as part of creating their future” (p. 2). These authors are to be commended for underscoring the enormous wealth transfer that occurred from Native nations to land-grant universities, of course. That said, we are left only to wonder how engagement activities with an economic focal point could become part of the action orientation

toward redress that Martin and Steele call for in their introductory remarks.

On that topic, is regrettable to note that, out of the 71 IEP designees listed at the time of this article’s writing, there were no 1994 Tribal Colleges on the APLU register. In addition, North Carolina A&T State University is the sole 1890 HBCU land-grant institution to have achieved this designation (more on that university in a moment). One is left to wonder whether it is even within the realm of possibility that Tribal Colleges would have enough resources to achieve the level of excellence in engagement demanded by the IEP designation. More likely than not, the answer is no at present. Thus, the IEP designation becomes yet one more indicator of the structural isolationism faced by Tribal Colleges and nearly all 1890 land-grant universities.

As noted above, North Carolina A&T State University is the only 1890 land-grant institution to have received the IEP designation, and it is also among the most recent recipients of this excellence in engagement recognition. Interestingly, this very university is represented in this special issue by Terrence Thomas and Alton Thompson, the authors of “Engagement Opportunities and Challenges of Transdisciplinary Practice: The 1890 Land-Grant Perspective.” Thomas and Thompson describe their efforts to better understand the perspectives of local stakeholders in their own university community while concurrently reporting on the viewpoints of research directors and Extension administrators working within 1890 land-grant institutions throughout the country.

The qualitative and quantitative data are revealing, especially in terms of the hints offered about where community engagement must head next. Where Thomas and Thompson absolutely shine, however, is in both their prognosis of the challenges facing all land-grant institutions (even though it often appears to be an issue particular to HBCUs and Tribal Colleges) and their formulation of potential solutions. Here is their prognosis first:

The communities served by 1890 and 1994 LGUs are dealing with extremely messy or ill-defined problems of poverty, food safety and security, community resilience, food and fiber production, equity, and systematic discrimination, among others (legacy problems), on top of the other social and economic problems that affect all of today’s society, which are also overly complex and far-reaching. (p. 3)

And here is their offered solution:

The question is: How do we employ the resources of the university to address messy, ill-structured problems using the land-grant philosophy as the guiding principle? We believe the answer lies in creating deep collaborative partnerships, adopting the principles and practices of Extension across the university's mission, and embracing a transdisciplinary approach in deploying university resources and expertise. (p. 3)

The call for deep collaborative partnerships among land-grant universities is particularly noteworthy, precisely because it connects so seamlessly as a remedy of relief for the institutional and structural isolationism we have been discussing so far.

Fortuitously, this special issue also contains the article "Cooperative Extension Builds Community Capacity Through Inclusive Engagement," in which Monroe and colleagues provide a glimpse into what such a partnership might look like: in this case, an 1862–1890 collaborative effort between the University of Florida and Florida A&M University that focuses on a deliberative democracy initiative. The authors recognize the need to transcend structural isolationism by "engaging underserved groups in community governance because sustainable *engagement and capacity building cannot be driven by a homogeneous group*" (p. 3, emphasis added). Most interesting here is the writing that specifically identifies the need for the 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities to "get its own house in order" (p. 3) before engaging with the community. And yet, exactly how this partnership came together to "model and build diversity, equity, and justice dimensions into the program" (p. 3) is largely left to the reader's imagination. The hope is that these authors will bring forward the "how to" descriptions of their work in subsequent scholarship activities.

A closer inspection of "Improving the Health of the Nation Through Transdisciplinary Community Engagement," written by Rennekamp, uncovers examples of various efforts to remediate the social determinants of health that can have a devastating impact on our nation's poorest families and communities. The situation is a bit different here in that the call is for land-grant universities—and especially their Cooperative Extension services—to combat the structural isolationism that divides the haves from

the have-nots in society. Using the term "health equity" as coined by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, this article does an admirable job of providing explicit examples of health care-focused activities from around the nation that have attempted to bridge disparities in health-related phenomena. Particularly noteworthy is the insistence on institutional partnerships as part of the five "high-level recommendations" (p. 3) put forward for Extension services to do this sort of work. Again, there may be no more powerful an effort to be undertaken than those collaborative activities among 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant institutions.

If somewhat removed from the topic of overcoming institutional and structural isolationism, the last three papers in this collection are at least indirectly related to remedies of relief. The Hurt and colleagues article entitled "Enhancing African American Youth Academic Success" offers a blueprint for how Extension can become more relevant to 21st-century stakeholders in the form of a set of recommendations generated through one land-grant university's efforts to cocreate programming with typically underserved community members. In turn, Jablonski and Hill's "Colorado State University's Extension Internship Program: Opportunities to Build Bridges" provides an incentive-based initiative that seeks to create those cross-campus linkages that so often plague Extension programs in the siloed environments described by Reed and Swanson. Finally, Woteki's article "Open Science, Open Data, and New Opportunities for Cooperative Extension" offers a process for utilizing data that can make Extension-based activities maximally relevant by addressing issues of importance identified by community stakeholders themselves. Once again, any activity that focuses attention on equal access—in Woteki's case, to scientific knowledge and research databases—at the very least implies the need to overcome a set of forces that tend to generate and reinforce isolationism across system levels.

Employing the old Pogo quote from Walter Kelly, we have met the enemy, and he is us. While the past 160 years of our nation's history have been positively impacted by the presence of land-grant universities, our "land-grant fierce" attitude should not make us immune to seeing our past and present foibles. Among our greatest shortcomings is the ignorance we display regarding the huge wealth transfer that created the initial land-grant universities, coupled with our obliviousness about the immense resource disparities that exist

between the 1862, 1890, and 1994 institutions. When you combine those weaknesses with the tendency for university personnel to stick to the tried and true, you create a recipe for stasis rather than a formula for change.

If land-grant professionals don't like change, well, as General Eric Shinseki once quipped, they're going to like irrelevance even less. We need to see more community engagement by land-grant institutions, especially in partnership with one another. We must see excellence in community engagement become as highly valued as excellence in research and teaching. And we should be doing everything within our powers to overcome the institutional and structural isolationism that have plagued our beloved public and land-grant institutions for the past century and a half.

References

Croft, G.K. (2019). *The U.S. land-grant university system: An overview* (Report No. R45897). Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45897.pdf>

Gavazzi, S.M. (2021). Reckoning with the original sin of land-grant universities: Remaining land-grant fierce while insisting on contrition and repentance. *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 8(1), 157–161.

Gavazzi, S.M., & Gee, E.G. (2018). *Land-grant universities for the future: Higher education for the public good*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lee, J.M., & Keys, S.W. (2013). *Land-grant but unequal: State one-to-one match funding for 1890 land-grant universities* (Report No. 3000-PB1). Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. <https://www.aplu.org/library/land-grant-but-unequal-state-one-to-one-match-funding-for-1890-land-grant-universities/file>

Martin, M.V., & Hipp, J.S. (2018). A time for substance: Confronting funding inequities at land grant institutions. *Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, 29(3), 50–51. <https://tribalcollegejournal.org/a-time-for-substance-confronting-funding-inequities-at-land-grant-institutions/>

National Institute for Food and Agriculture. (2021). *FY 2021 consolidated funding tables*. <https://www.land-grant.org/appropriations-documents>

About the Author

Stephen M. Gavazzi is a professor of human development and family science, and director of CHRR at The Ohio State University.