

Handy guide and passionate call to engage

Reviewed Book

HOFFMAN, A. J. (2021).
THE ENGAGED SCHOLAR — EXPANDING THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN
TODAY'S WORLD.
STANFORD, CA, U.S.A.: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Reviewed by

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Abstract

Andrew J. Hoffman, Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan, has written *The Engaged Scholar — Expanding the Impact of Academic Research in Today's World* (2021 Stanford University Press). According to the author, most researchers want to make a difference, but academic institutions often do not value public engagement, leading to disengaged scientists. Hoffman gives and reexamines arguments for why scholars should engage with other parts of society. He conveys several tips on how to do it and encourages researchers to take part in public debate. The limitations of the current evaluation system are also scrutinized, and new measures of impact discussed. The book is worth reading for academic leaders and researchers, as well as science communicators and science journalists.

Keywords

Public engagement with science and technology; Public perception of science and technology; Science and policy-making

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.22323/2.22010702>

Submitted: 20th November 2022

Accepted: 22nd November 2022

Published: 30th January 2023

Why did you choose to become a professor?

That's a question every academic should ask themselves, according to Andrew J. Hoffman, Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan. It is also the very first sentence of his book *The Engaged Scholar — Expanding the Impact of Academic Research in Today's World* (2021 Stanford University Press). His own answer is simple: he wanted to have a positive imprint on the world.

According to Hoffman, most researchers want to make a difference, but academic institutions often do not value public engagement. He cites fellow scholars arguing

that researchers even have become less inclined to take part in public discourse. Therefore, his quest is to reexamine “how we practice our craft, to what purpose, and to which audiences”.

The book gives a background to how the concept of the engaged scholar has developed since World War II and a wealth of arguments for why scholars should engage with other parts of society. In addition, Hoffman conveys several practical tips on how to do it.

The author’s own research explores the processes by which environmental challenges both emerge and evolve as social, political, and managerial issues. He writes about the roles scholars can play in public and political discourse. Hoffman has published 18 books and hundreds of book chapters and articles. He also received many awards, among them *the 2022 Responsible Research in Business Management Book Award for The Engaged Scholar*.

The book is divided into five, easily read chapters, without jargon. Hoffman starts off with observations that many people are turning away from science and questioning facts, and that this started long before the Covid-19 pandemic. There are of course many reasons that people cling to their beliefs and values, but according to the author, one important explanation is that scientists are disengaged when it comes to explaining their processes and findings. This, in turn, is partly due to the rules of academic tenure and promotion that are not rewarding scientists’ communication and public engagement efforts. Bottom line: if you want to change behaviour, change the reward system!

The importance of researchers communicating and engaging with citizens and stakeholders has been on the societal agenda for many years. But, as Hoffman puts it, “now more than ever we need *engaged scholars* who can bring their expertise to the world, informing public and political discourse on the great challenges of our day”. He also encourages researchers to take part in public debate; otherwise less accurate voices and pseudo-experts will prevail.

In a practice-relevant chapter, Hoffman proposes six rules or guidelines for engagement: *Find your voice* — and use it, *Tell stories* — because they stick, *Avoid the “Knowledge Deficit Model”* — it’s a two-way learning process, *Know your audience* — adapt to their interests and needs, *Rely on solid research* — also on science communication, and *Change publication strategy* — use a broader portfolio of outlets to reach general and professional audiences.

There is also an extensive chapter on social media, the importance of using it and how best to do it. Its presence is here to stay so “think of this as a public service”, Hoffman advises.

The limitations of the current system are also scrutinized. According to the author, these form the greatest obstacles to adding public engagement to an academic portfolio. He therefore discusses public engagement performance metrics, new measures of impact and how these could and should influence promotion and tenure. There are already some systems in place, but they are still in their infancy and need further development.

The book is quite U.S. focused, with mostly American scholars being cited. Clearly, there are great challenges for science in the currently polarized U.S. society. From a perspective outside the U.S., it is interesting (and depressing) to learn about the differences in trust in science between Republicans and Democrats. On the other hand, the notion that engagement activities are not valued enough in academia, seems to be universal. And so are the examples and advice given by the author.

Although the book was published in 2021, its content sometimes feels a bit outdated. Some of the studies referred to seem dated, such as the 2004 reference to a National Science Foundation study reporting that two-thirds of Americans do not clearly understand the scientific process. There is also a wealth of citations and arguments, sometimes making the text a bit too extensive and unstructured.

Academic culture is persistent and takes time to change. The cited research results indicate that much more must be done on an individual as well as structural level to encourage engagement. Therefore, the book is well worth reading for academic leaders and researchers, as well as science communicators and science journalists. Despite some weaknesses, *The Engaged Scholar* is a handy guide and a passionate call for researchers to engage with society.

Author

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How to cite

Askwall, C. (2023). 'Handy guide and passionate call to engage'. *JCOM* 22 (01), R02. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.22010702>.



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