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# Unusual Conversations

A reflection on the mechanics of  
internationally engaged public scholarship

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Since beginning my work as a faculty member of a Japanese university in 2013, I have begun sharing my research at international conferences outside the United States (US). At these events, I have repeatedly been approached by social scientists and educators like myself from across the Asia-Pacific and beyond wanting to talk about public scholarship in new and different ways. Through these experiences I have learned that in some parts of the world universities and colleges have a long history of engagement with their communities and that many were established with the primary mission of advancing social development. I have also learned that researchers and practitioners from across the Asia-Pacific are interested in connecting with American institutions that are also exploring research designed to improve the lives of members of the communities in which they work, but that they are reluctant to do so for reasons different from those American scholars might envisage. These are researchers who see blogs, webinars and new media as options for knowledge creation. These are researchers who are also open to exploring alternative forms of what researchers in the United States have traditionally considered academic work, and whose academic experience is gleaned from areas far less economically prosperous than what many American scholars are used to, and who may have something to teach us.

Developing working relationships with an international community of university researchers with a commitment and passion for social responsibility across the Asia-Pacific has helped me see that there are others working to support the same values more forward-thinking American organisations have worked so hard to advance and uphold. Once people in my new academic home began giving me titles like 'International Liaison', it became clear that people outside the US saw me as a channel, and that it would be my charge to marry my two regions and my two academic lives – one that imagines a more responsive and responsible United States and one that is able to tap into the

global academic community as a resource for reinterpreting our perceived strengths and weaknesses, our values, and the level of our commitment to improving society.

In this article I will discuss the evolution of this work, first providing an overview of this ongoing project and questions I have shared with colleagues in the US and overseas. Next, I will take a look at the connections that are currently being made between publicly engaged scholars in the US and abroad in order to provide some context for the project. I will naturally include the voices of my Asia-Pacific co-presenters at the Imagining America (IA) 2014 National Conference, as well as those of conference participants, as we actively reflected on the mechanics of internationally engaged scholarship. (Imagining America is a consortium of colleges, universities and cultural organisations aiming to strengthen public roles through research, action, coalition building and leadership development.) Finally, I will provide a summary of responses and three themes that emerged from my session at the conference. These responses will frame a new model of internationally engaged scholarship and serve as a critical reflection on the practice of public scholarship overseas.

### **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

How do emerging and experienced scholars from the Asia-Pacific become involved in civic life? How can I create ways of marrying my work in two academic homes around the theme of publicly engaged work? These were two of the questions that initially guided my journey as an early career American researcher who had just accepted his first faculty position at a university in Japan. American scholars in Japan face the challenge of having to navigate several different cultures at the same time – the academic cultures they bring with them from the United States, the distinct culture of the Japanese workplace and the Japanese academic climate, and the dominant Japanese culture. These differences forced me to reflect on how international scholars and students in the US deal with their own challenges with cultures that are unfamiliar to them.

In the two years since I arrived in Japan, I have come to realise that at my university, one of Asia's top-ranked and internationally accredited business schools, and at many others spread across this region, few faculty members actively value or even consider community-based scholarship as a necessary component of academic fulfilment. In this sense, my university is, like many others, a purposefully isolated entity where many students and staff go to learn and develop ideas that are only loosely connected to the world surrounding them. This isolation stirred in me a desire to depict the context for my own internationally engaged activities while addressing the many gaps that exist between scholarship and practice at my new academic home. At domestic and international events across my new region

I have been most interested in learning about whether and how other scholars choose to serve their communities, and how they perceive the work of scholars in the United States.

The goal of my workshop session at IA 2014, entitled 'Increasing Exchange Between Publicly Engaged Scholars Inside and Outside of the United States', and of this ongoing project is to focus on finding ways to connect American scholars with a network of higher education and research institutions that hold a commitment to research and service for community development overseas. Participant discussion at the conference was focused on understanding the value of developing partnerships with scholars from different cultures and disciplines, and on developing ways to logically increase the degree of exchange that takes place between publicly engaged scholars inside and outside the United States.

### **PROJECT CONTEXT**

In this section I will take a quick look at the connections that are currently being made between publicly engaged scholars in the US and those overseas in order to provide some additional context for this project. IA's mission was initially designed to develop and sustain relationships with scholars from across disciplines and regions inside the United States, but IA is now beginning work to forge a more global identity. IA is not alone in acknowledging that higher education institutions do not exist in isolation from society or from the communities in which they are located. Other organisations have tailored their work towards strengthening the civic roles and responsibilities of higher education. On both small and large scales, universities are increasingly tackling community problems and enhancing quality of life by embedding public scholarship as a core mission alongside teaching and research (Hollister et al. 2012). These universities are working to instil in their faculty, staff and students a sense of responsibility and commitment to the greater social good.

One such organisation is the Talloires Network, established at Tufts University in Massachusetts, USA. The Talloires Network is an international association of institutions that was founded in 2005 on the belief that universities around the world should be connected in their mission to build a global movement, not unlike the one imagined by IA. While the mission, values and goals of both of these organisations align in many ways, the Talloires Network has grown into the largest international network focused on higher education civic engagement, increasing since 2005 to over 350 members in 72 countries with a combined enrolment of over 6 million students. The network, based at Tufts University, is guided by an elected Steering Committee of 13 members from countries around the world.

The experiences of Talloires to date have helped to illuminate opportunities and challenges with respect to the mechanics of internationally engaged public scholarship. As Talloires continues to develop new programs to build global higher

education civic engagement, it has come to realise that decisive leadership, alignment of all university processes and active student involvement are key aspects of an engaged university (Talloires Network 2011a). The world is a different place from what it was in 2005, and the societies in which universities are located are facing increasing economic, civil and social challenges. As a result, it is crucial for organisations to collaborate with others that are facing similar challenges.

Another organisation that was brought to my attention at IA 2014 is the Pacific Rim Community Design Network. This network was launched following a working conference on participatory community design at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1998. Since that time, through conferences and joint projects, a network of American researchers have been collaborating with and providing mutual support to countries across the Pacific Rim, including Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. This network also serves as a forum for comparative understanding of community design in the fast changing social context of these countries, and as an inspiring model for potential collaborations between the United States and my new academic region. IA 2014 conference participants like Jeff Hou, a professor and chair at the University of Washington and a member of this network, have played an active role in engaging marginalised communities and citizens through cross-cultural learning between the United States and the Asia-Pacific.

### **UNUSUAL CONVERSATIONS**

My session at IA 2014 focused specifically on the extent to which the potential of American scholarship can be realised when universities worldwide mobilise students, faculty, staff and citizens to develop programs of mutual benefit. The idea of expanding our collective imagination beyond the boundaries of the United States served as a starting point for the workshop. In addition to my two co-presenters from the Asia-Pacific, session participants included graduate students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, graduate exchange students from overseas, and faculty members from a range of disciplines and mixed cultural backgrounds.

The session continued, with researchers taking turns sharing their reasons for attending. The differences between their comments revealed a great deal about how conversations like these can prove valuable for scholars interested in making sense of the differences between their personal homes, academic homes and ethnic identities. These conversations were recorded, transcribed and analysed in order to make sense of some key themes of the session and this project.

Janeke Thumbran, a doctoral student, was the first to share her reason for being in attendance. Like all of the graduate students at this session, Janeke was attending school in the United States at the University of Minnesota. Like me, Janeke's research and home flowed between two different continents. Janeke had this to say:

Janeke: *I am looking to find a way to marry the kind of work I do here with what I do in South Africa and that is why I'm here.*

This desire to marry academic identities, introduced by me at the beginning of the session, proved to be a key theme of the conversation early on. Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, an associate professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, continued this line of thought, commenting on how her own cultural backgrounds had become a critical part of her academic identity.

Ifeoma: *I have a background from multiple places, my father is Nigerian, and my mother and I are Jamaican. This has always been a fundamental part of my life and my being but also my public scholarship work as it connects communities in Middle Tennessee with communities in the Republic of Panama. I conduct interviews with communities and use those interviews at the moment of collection for programs and projects for youth and seniors in those communities. I am very invested in IA not just being about imagining the United States, but also imagining the hemisphere and the world. So this organization [is] really creating a model, a template and tools that can be used around the world, but also as a way of highlighting tools that are already being used around the world. I think a session like this can be that space.*

Ifeoma's research is clearly focused on encounters between these peoples in the areas of culture, identity and ideology. The goal of Ifeoma's work is to understand paradigms for intercultural interaction as well as barriers to new cross-group engagements.

Like Ifeoma, my virtual co-presenter Vicky Lin's (aka Hy Tran Lam) cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and mixed parentage, play a role in the direction her young academic life is heading. Vicky, who is half Chinese and half Vietnamese, is currently undertaking an ambitious line of research that connects back to her ethnic homes and identities. Vicky is a graduate student at the prestigious Yuan Ze University in Taiwan, and an ethnic Chinese from Vietnam who is currently exploring and working to resolve the tensions that exist for new Vietnamese entering Taiwan. Vicky is also a translator, who uses her language skills while working with volunteers to build a bridge between these two cultures, both in Taiwan and in her home country of Vietnam. At the specific request of the conference participants, Vicky summarised her work in the following way,

Vicky: *In my research I am looking at the misunderstandings between ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese and how these differences manifest themselves for immigrants in Vietnam and Taiwan. These misunderstandings lead to negative consequences for these immigrants and on policies set by their respective governments. I met with a number of Chinese families in 2014 – in many cases there were three generations of Chinese living together in Vietnam – in order to help these families establish a language identity whereby the children are able to speak both the mother tongue [Chinese]*

*and learn Vietnamese so they can become acculturated and more economically advantaged. On my next project I plan to support the Vietnamese migrant population in Taiwan by helping them deal with the various challenges they face [in Taiwan], such as racism, language barriers, and cultural differences.*

Vicky's plan to support cross-cultural understanding and integration in this way is also clearly connected to her own identity. While some institutions and researchers in the United States are striving to apply their research in public settings for the sake of the greater good, in my new region I have repeatedly been exposed to what I see as a much more seamless and natural approach to conducting academic research.

Following Vicky's presentation, my second virtual co-presenter Chatree Preedaanthasuk, from Thailand, was asked by IA participants to share a summary of his research. Chatree conducted his doctoral study at Keio University in Tokyo, Japan. Despite the distance between his academic and personal homes, Chatree's doctoral study in Tokyo on crisis management was rooted in improving the lived realities of community members in his ethnic home of Thailand where he now works as a professor. Chatree approached me after a presentation I gave at an international conference in Japan and shared with me the methods he used to develop his crisis management framework. Chatree's influence as an academic at a top-ranking Japanese university gained him access to government officials at home, members of rescue teams and members of the community, who also assisted in the recovery efforts following a period of severe flooding in Thailand in 2011.

As the group completed introductions and began to focus on understanding the value of connecting committed American institutions with the missions of publicly engaged scholars overseas, the session took an exciting and unexpected turn. While some American scholars who were in attendance were interested in discussing ways to encourage their American students to seek, find and rethink their understanding of the world and civic engagement by experiencing life abroad, international scholars in attendance remarked that it was the American universities that needed to be more encouraging and receptive to the potential contributions of marginalised international voices at these very same institutions. This striking contrast between American faculty members searching for ways to engage their ideologically isolated students with the wider world and young international scholars pursuing graduate study in the United States who felt as if they were being estranged from their campus communities was the first revelation of this session. In the following passages we can see how responses to this key theme unfolded, and how spirited the discussion became between session participants.

*Ifeoma: The value of connecting IA's mission to the mission of committed scholars in the US and around the world is the value for the societies in which we all live. It is a kind of broader value that we*

*can potentially have an impact on the ways that people function. We've just heard Chatree talking about crisis management, and so [we can see] the value of sharing thoughts and experiences around working with communities. I can imagine him and his work being placed in conversation with partners in New Orleans and having conversations around Katrina based on what happened in Thailand and the ways that can help both places avoid repetitions of the crises, and of the responses to those crises. So that it's not just happening on the state level, and it's not just happening on the government organization level, but that it's happening on the people-to-people level.*

*Janeke: I think I am having trouble with this question because the question is phrased as what is the value of connecting and I think it's so obvious that there is such great value to it. The fact that you pose this question is very much a reflection of the fact that our [American] institutions don't recognize this, and that's precisely the problem. And so I think as an international student in the US something I would like to see a lot more of is [American institutions] actually taking the international students a lot more seriously. Viewing the international students as an actual resource.*

Ifeoma (interjects): *As a person—*

*Janeke: Not just as people who come here to learn but as people that actually have something more to give than just culture. Because what a lot of universities do is they take, and they invite international students to purport, and you know other ethnic minorities, particularly black students from surrounding communities, and so that never becomes part of the diversity conversation.*

Jonathan (interjects): *And the international students and minority students are getting that message as well—*

*Janeke: Yeah, and international students are there to fill the diversity quota and they are invited to do all these different cultural performances, like come and give us a talk about your culture. I'm from South Africa, an incredibly diverse society, and I cannot even begin to talk about what South African culture is, you know? To view international students as a resource, to see them as more than just some[one] that can talk about culture, as people that can talk about what public scholarship means. Those conversations are not happening at my university. All they want us to do is sing and dance and to be a good little South African.*

The group became excited about this line of thought, encouraging Janeke to speak these truths. In order to develop more meaningful connections with scholars abroad, one strategy that needs to be taken by American institutions is to first develop ways for international scholars already in place in America to play more active roles in developing the academic culture and climate of

their schools. In order to make relationships sustainable between cultures, we need to begin by connecting people from different cultures around common issues in our own institutions.

Conversation soon shifted to how we could logically increase the amount of exchange that takes place between publicly engaged scholars inside and outside America. This topic received immediate attention from my co-presenter, Vicky Lin.

*Vicky: I think that once we talk to others, we learn about our differences. I think that different cultures really do react differently to situations, and that communication is necessary for us to be able to think outside of the place where we are.*

### **SUMMARY OF RESPONSES**

Three themes emerged from the conversations held during this session. Each of these themes is connected to a new awareness by those in attendance and serves to frame a new model of internationally engaged public scholarship. First, it was clear that participants from mixed cultural and ethnic backgrounds appreciated this space to share their hopes and concerns with others who are working tirelessly to thrive under unusual circumstances and to marry their non-traditional academic and personal lives. Researchers pursuing scholarship away from their academic homes who felt estranged in their new academic climates felt drawn out of isolation by being given this opportunity to actively share their concerns with others dealing with similar challenges. The myriad pressures of being a graduate and/or graduate exchange student and/or faculty member rarely allow time for non-traditional scholars to share their goals, frustrations and concerns as they relate to factors existing outside the institution or the departments of institutions in which they are asked to perform.

This session saw multiple participants point to the value of person-to-person conversations around common issues including, but not limited to, environmental issues, human rights issues and issues related to crisis management. There is no substitute for trust and personal relationships built by face-to-face interactions. While conference presentations and journals are important forums for disseminating and advancing research, it is in meetings and conversations like those that took place when the seed for this project was sown at events in Asia, and those that continued at IA 2014, that are the most significant for building strong and mutually supportive personal relationships. Nearly all of the participants in attendance at this session were conducting research or working to support instruction using their international experience or background. As a result, conversations that may be marked as unusual in ivory tower isolation rang true to those in attendance, and discussions were developed and pathways to



engagement established more readily than might be anticipated if the group had been larger and less connected personally to the aims of the session.

Second, questions that focused on the value of exchange between scholars inside and outside the United States revealed some shortcomings of American universities in terms of their advocacy for international scholars, which was found to be often misguided or lacking entirely. Here, participants pointed to the value of acknowledging international scholars and emerging experts already in American institutions and finding more meaningful ways to tap into their marginalised voices. Further, it was clear that participants with mixed cultural and/or professional backgrounds have a lot to say about the current state of higher education in the United States. It was also clear that their opinions matter to American faculty members looking for new solutions to engaging their American students and staff. If American universities could more seamlessly weave the academic interests and skills of international exchange students and professionals from overseas into the fabric of their institutions, student bodies and faculties, new possibilities for academic growth relating to intercultural and interdisciplinary understanding could be possible.

At my university in Japan, I see many of the same issues occurring between the international exchange students and Japanese students. While the university has strong ties with 87 partner universities in 41 countries on 6 continents, and is attended by many students from these same universities every semester, the nature of the relationship between the university and these students continues to be misdirected at times. At my institution, it is the Japanese students who are asked to put on cultural performances, while the international exchange students' opportunities for engagement are often limited to traditional Japanese activities such as tea ceremony and flower arrangement. While some of the students are visiting the university to have brief, semester-long Japanese experiences, and enjoy these cultural excursions, it is clear that both these students and the students pursuing longer periods of study (all of whom come from competitive academic environments overseas) also want to engage with and learn from their new classmates in more meaningful ways in the classroom, on campus and in the community. As a professor in the international exchange program, an advocate for programs that connect these two disparate groups of the university community, and as a liaison between the two, what I have found even more disheartening is the degree to which both the Japanese and international exchange students recognise that these types of structured interactions have been developed in order to preserve the status quo.

A third key theme that quietly emerged from the session was the high level of interest (and at times anxiety) those in attendance demonstrated when listening to others share their approaches to publicly engaged work. Once it became clear that there was no language barrier, it was fascinating to observe how intently

members of the group – all from vastly different backgrounds – were listening to, asking about and relating to how others made sense of their academic lives in truly unique situations. The incredible contrast between a frustrated South African woman speaking about her research in Minnesota and a Vietnamese woman talking about her research with marginalised populations in Taiwan was a source of inspiration and empowerment for members of the audience who were also conducting internationally engaged work. These participants encouraged others to speak out, ask follow-up questions and give testimony of their excitement and relief related to the experience.

The session proved to be a wake-up call for participants who were looking for ways to inspire their American students on a local level, and their approaches to public scholarship in American institutions, particularly those existing in cultural and geographic isolation. Further, during this session participants living academic lives that could hardly be imagined a generation ago found common ground with traditional and non-traditional scholars and artists in a very short space of time. This points to the value of these unusual conversations and of listening to and understanding how those outside the United States make sense of and reinterpret their academic lives.

### **TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF INTERNATIONALLY ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP**

While there is evidence to suggest that it can be more effective for universities with shared social, cultural and economic contexts to work together before they partner with institutions overseas (Watson et al. 2011), it is the responsibility of every inclusive organisation today to develop a conceptual framework for university civic engagement that includes the voices, narratives and best practices of those at the international level (Ellison & Eatman 2008). If American institutions can gather and propagate global practices of civic engagement, and interpret these practices in the language, culture and context of each region, the possibilities for ideas expansion and our own collective imagination are boundless (Talloires Network 2010). When experts and emerging experts across disciplines partner with others who are receptive to and/or are seeking assistance with the intention of providing ongoing support, positive sustainability outcomes for both groups can become a reality (Eatman 2012). In the future, scholars and university programs that do not actively seek out these partnerships will not be able to keep up with changes in practice and methodology (Boyer 2014). As knowledge-making and information-sharing have become more readily accessible in parts of the world that had previously lacked access to technology and international perspectives, the need to understand the context for our internationally engaged activities inside and outside America becomes more critical than ever before. (During 2015, I had the privilege of working as a visiting professor at a Talloires Network university in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Here I found a campus in a

developing nation engaged in several community-based programs designed to foster mutually beneficial partnerships between the campus and surrounding urban, suburban and rural communities. The following year, I was invited to attend an international conference in Pakistan, hosted by a partner school of my own university in Japan. Just as with my time in Kazakhstan, this invitation stemmed from an interest in my role as a liaison in the development of national and inter-university collaborations and linkages. It speaks to a change in what universities in developing nations are looking for in the academy.)

The road to the presentation at IA 2014 was a bumpy one. That being said, the value of this work for American scholars interested in rethinking their approaches to internationally engaged work, for foreign scholars doing research in the United States and overseas, and for those co-presenters from outside the United States who, until then, had not been given opportunities to peer into the American academic system was apparent. The willingness of my co-presenters to engage with my call to liaise in Japan, and to follow through and join me virtually at the American event, shows a shift in how academia can function as an excellent and a more equitable international forum for ideas and service in the future.

I have discovered through this project that, while the reluctance of international scholars to connect with American institutions is in part based on perceived geographical or ideological distance, or quality of work, there is something else at play: the discourse of American higher education. I have noticed time and again that scholars from outside the United States become perplexed when I apply academic language such as 'civic engagement' or 'publicly engaged scholarship' to the work done in American universities. As mentioned earlier, academic research taking place across the Asia-Pacific, especially research in developing countries, naturally has a more service-minded focus. Scholars from across my new region, including my co-presenters, were surprised to see that we give this research a name, that we have special events for presenting this brand of research, and this has led to concern that their own work might not be what American researchers consider as valid. While it is critical that American institutions advocate for their communities and begin to expect their students and staff to play an active role in doing so as well, it is important they also recognise that, in some countries, the primary purpose of universities and colleges, some of which are older than the nations in which they are located, has always been to advance social development. It is also important to recognise that many scholars from around the world have an excellent grasp of the English language, but struggle to understand when English becomes pedantic. In order to build personal connections with researchers from outside the United States (and within), it is essential that we communicate using language that can be understood by people unfamiliar with the rhetoric of the academy and the demanding jargon we apply to our areas of expertise.

This new model of engaged scholarship includes a willingness to listen before speaking and to explore alternative ways of talking about what it means to be an academic today. This new model must eliminate or minimise language that might alienate others. American researchers interested in serving their communities, both at home and abroad, must also be willing to look to international scholars, students and staff at their own institutions before looking outside for answers. This will help both parties to draw closer ideologically and develop new shared theories and local language that can be tested through collective action. Once this language has been developed, American researchers will be better prepared for, and more capable of, operating in a truly global context.

Finally, this new model points to a need for American scholars at home and abroad to create spaces for these types of dialogue to occur across disciplines and cultures. Data collected from conference participants and experience demonstrate that publicly engaged scholars can benefit from approaches taken by researchers inside and outside their local communities. Armed with an increased awareness of the potential for experiences to intersect across disciplines and cultures, an increased ability to connect with others and a resolve to develop new points of access, researchers today are placed to transform their communities and the academies that serve those communities in profound ways.

### **CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

One key outcome of this project is that we were able to determine and define what counts as meaningful action for both American researchers working overseas and scholars from overseas conducting research in the United States, and provide better understanding of the development of practices that could make such action possible on a global scale. Because the conversations presented in this distinctive case study were happening for many conference attendees for the first time, I propose that this reflection on the mechanics of internationally engaged scholarship be typified as an introduction to a new model of internationally engaged scholarship – a model that esteemed scholar and session participant Ifeoma aptly referred to as ‘Transnational Figuring Out’. As more American scholars begin to forge their academic identities outside the United States (Altbach & McGill Peterson 1998), as universities in the United States continue to emphasise the value of international exchange and public scholarship, and as I continue to ask and redevelop the questions that started this project, both at events in the United States and overseas in the fall of 2015, I can see these unusual conversations coming into better focus as new voices create multiple layers of overlapping and distinctive wisdom.

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