

## Engaged with the community, or just dating?

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One of my day jobs has me working at a large state university, writing for an office dedicated to “outreach and engagement.” For the uninitiated, the phrase “outreach and engagement,” could refer to a host of missions -- Are we trying to connect alumni with the university? Is this office dedicated to building a better relationship with the community? Is this the student recruitment office?

The actual mission is much more interesting: We work to connect professors with outside partners so that they can do research together, co-create knowledge, and share the benefits of strong partnerships. These projects run the gamut. Some projects are centered on a specific class, where students spend a semester designing something in partnership with an outside organization. Others are longer term, such as the project in which a professor is designing and testing infrastructure technology with researchers at the state department of transportation.

As I live in this world a few days a week, and at other times ponder the world of theological education for *In Trust*, I often wonder, what would engaged scholarship (for that’s what it’s called in the business of higher education), what would engaged scholarship look like in a theological context? It’s a tough question, because seminaries are typically not doing research. The M.Div. is a professional degree, after all. So instead of engaged scholarship, students are often sent out into the community to take on internships. While internships are engagement,

they're typically not scholarly, nor are the students partnering with a congregation to create something new.

Recently, however, I heard a seminary president talking about the way his school "does" historiography. Instead of sitting in a classroom and having the church's history fed to the students, his school's students are taught how to do historiography in the context of congregational life. They learn how to research history in partnership with the local congregation. This model works well for his school, since his students spend most of the year in their local church, and I finally handed an example of seminary students engaging with the community in a way that goes beyond "pastoral intern."

So I have to ask: Are other institutions of theological higher education doing engaged scholarship (whether they call it that or not)? Is your institution partnering professors, students, and outside organizations in a unique way? If so, I'd love to hear about it.