

The Problem With Calling Scholars 'Too Political'

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Education scholars have a responsibility to the public good

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Education scholars should vigorously participate in public debate about the important issues on which they have expertise as one way to give back to the networks that support them. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I teach, the federal government and numerous private foundations and individual donors invest in the development of graduate students and faculty by funding teaching, research, and scholarships. This support is critical to creating a society in which true expertise—the kind that develops over many years from concentrated study in a particular area—can inform the decisions that we make as a community.

Among education scholars' responsibilities, contributing to the public good comes first. Scholars who opt out of public-policy debates for which they have a deep well of knowledge violate public trust and compromise the university's mission to reach beyond the classroom. After all, the knowledge of scholars belongs not to them alone but to all of us. Consider the scholar who has spent years—often decades—rigorously investigating what can be done to narrow the opportunity gaps in schooling that harm too many young people and their families: When she weighs in on debates around this issue, she should not be merely tolerated, but should be recognized and applauded for doing her job.



In this special collection of Commentary essays, Frederick M. Hess and four education scholars discuss the pros and cons for academics who want to wade into public debate.

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Yet it's understandable why some scholars might be hesitant to voice their opinions. Scholars are sometimes castigated for being "political," as if there were something unseemly at best, and manipulative at worst, in connecting expertise with the creation of public policy. Politics have become so highly polarized in recent years—and because, in this day and age, everyone can share their thoughts with the click of a mouse—scholars may not be regarded as highly skilled experts whose opinions we should seek out.

Of course, specialized experts are not the only voices that should be taken seriously in public discourse. But to eschew expertise is to rob the public of what we know it takes to develop high-quality answers to nuanced and important problems. This does not mean, however, that scholars should express every opinion they have on every issue for public consideration.

Consider my own case. For almost two decades, I have been honing my expertise on what schools should or should not do to teach young people thoughtful engagement in discussions of controversial political issues. Reporters frequently contact me for my opinion, and I have a duty to weigh in on these debates. The university supports me even if political leaders criticize me for doing so.

But I lack expertise on a whole host of other issues—even though I do have opinions as a citizen. When reporters ask me to weigh in on issues for which I do not have true expertise, I demur because I must not confuse my opinions as a citizen with my opinions as a scholar—which are well-warranted conclusions based on years of rigorous study.

By exercising intellectual humility, scholars can maintain the line between providing much-needed contributions to policy issues and becoming simply another partisan voice.