

## Real-World Impact

**Author :** Mike Smith

**Categories :** [Innovation](#), [Public Service](#), [UNC-Chapel Hill](#)

**Date :** September 1, 2013



Last week I read a refreshingly candid article titled [“Choosing Real-World Impact over Impact Factor”](#) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. It was written by Sam Wineburg, a professor of education and history at Stanford University. He had spent time on various activities intended to make a practical difference for teachers in their work, but there was no place to include those activities in his annual report because they are not valued by the academy.

Wineburg had shifted away from peer-reviewed articles and spent a year “creating digital products for high-school history teachers. These include lesson plans, sets of original documents, instructional videos, and short assessments of historical thinking.” Instead of finding a traditional publisher, Wineburg and his graduate students made their materials available online and they “are closing in on a million downloads.” This was an entirely new experience for Wineburg, whose graduate training and previous faculty experience had not prepared him for translating his scholarship for the real world. Instead, he offers this summary of university culture, especially in schools of education: “To make it in the academy, make sure no one outside understands a word you’re saying.”

Wineburg has not given up on traditional scholarship for himself and for his graduate students, which is important because his research formed the basis for his work with teachers. “What’s changed is that I’ve stopped lying to myself. I no longer believe that the scholarly enterprise of



education has much to do with educational betterment. I no longer believe that when I publish articles in journals with minuscule circulations I am contributing to the field—if by “field” we mean the thousands of well-meaning individuals who go to work each day in places called schools.”

In my opinion Wineburg’s conclusion applies to the social sciences practiced in many other professional schools. “Academics sometimes tell themselves that there’s a cadre of translators out there who scour scholarly journals and render findings into normal language—a speculation right up there with aliens at Roswell and Barack Obama’s Kenyan birth. The truth is that what goes on in the pages of the *American Educational Research Journal* stays in the pages of the *American Education Research Journal*.” Pick any other peer-reviewed academic journal, including *Public Administration Review*, and you would be hard-pressed to show that it influences the work of practitioners. [I suspect it may be different in many of the natural sciences where there is a greater alignment with corporate research.]

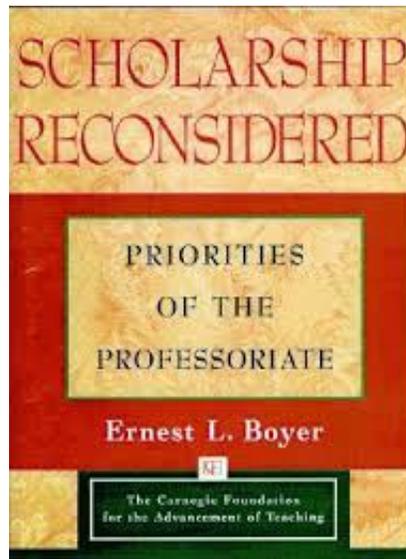
I want Professor Wineburg and others to know that there is at least one professional school where you don’t have to choose between creating new knowledge and having a real-world impact. It is the School of Government. Our faculty members live in both worlds—producing legal and social science research that improves understanding about government, and translating that research so that public officials can understand and apply it.



Ernest Boyer’s classic report in 1997, [Scholarship Reconsidered](#), challenged universities to embrace a more expansive and flexible definition of scholarship. He encouraged institutions of higher education “to support and reward not only those scholars uniquely gifted in research, but also those who excel in the integration and application of knowledge . . . .” I am skeptical about whether most research universities have accepted Boyer’s challenge. School of Government faculty members are involved in both kinds of work—original research and its application. Boyer wrote that “[t]o make complex ideas understandable to a large audience can be a difficult, demanding task, one that requires not only a deep and thorough knowledge of one’s field, but keen literary skills, as well.” The School has long been a leader in the field of engaged



scholarship, even before it had a name, and our faculty members have continued to find innovative ways to make their knowledge accessible—whether through webinars or blogs. Unlike Professor Wineburg, they are rewarded for their real-world impact through the School's promotion and tenure policy, which is recognized by the University as a legitimate form of scholarship.



I love that the School of Government is a recognized leader in the area of engaged scholarship. For a variety of reasons, higher education is slowly, very slowly, moving in that direction. It is so much easier to conduct traditional scholarship and not worry about whether it makes a difference for practitioners. Translating academic research and making it accessible to public officials—without losing the complexity—is hard work that requires faculty members to exercise a different set of intellectual muscles. The School asks faculty members to live in both worlds and they do it beautifully—with the advantage of support from a professional staff that makes the translation so much easier and more effective.