Confessions of a Pracademic: Searching for a Virtuous Cycle of Theory Building, Teaching, and Action Research

Lawrence Susskind

In this article, I describe my career as a pracademic. Over several decades, I have been able to maintain a substantial private practice in public dispute resolution and also meet the teaching, advising, and research demands of an academic career. I have achieved this by engaging primarily in action research: I begin with "problems" in the field and work collaboratively with stakeholders to generate "solutions" that meet their interests. I then document and analyze these interventions to build prescriptive theory through systematic reflection on my own involvement.

In this article, I discuss how I have been able to achieve success as a "pracademic," but also consider the challenges that young scholars who seek to engage in practice confront today. I further describe some possible strategies for successfully integrating a substantial practice component into an academic career in conflict resolution.

Key words: Pracademic, negotiation teaching, public policy disputes, action research.

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Background

I am an academic. I have been teaching full time at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for forty-two years. I have supervised more than sixty doctoral students and several hundred professional degree candidates in the urban planning field.

My approach to scholarship involves action research. That means I start with "problems" in the field and work collaboratively with stakeholders to generate "solutions" that meet their interests. I then document and analyze these interventions to build prescriptive theory through systematic reflection on my own involvement.

Along with many other applied social scientists, I provide training to "warring factions" in various kinds of public disputes as a way of enhancing their capacity to negotiate policy priorities, environmental or health standards, and the details of development projects or plans (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987). In addition, I have tried to make the case that mediation can enhance collaborative problem solving in democratic settings by offering my services as a professional neutral. There are, of course, many other academics in law, business management, social work, education, and other fields who do the same thing.

I helped to found an interuniversity research center called the Program on Negotiation (PON) at Harvard Law School (http://www.pon.harvard. edu) where I have been part of interdisciplinary research teams for more than thirty years. Much of the research we do at PON follows traditional protocols of applied social science. We begin with questions at the frontier of the dispute resolution or conflict management field and organize studies that peer reviewers in our field will find methodologically acceptable. This allows us to publish articles in academic journals as well as scholarly books that contribute to social science theory. I have published such articles and books myself, but I have put *even more* energy into publishing professional reports, writing blogs, producing videos, and creating other means of communication that allow me to reach broader professional and public audiences.

I am a practicing mediator, having founded a not-for-profit company, the Consensus Building Institute (CBI), which provides dispute resolution services in complicated public disputes around the world. CBI (http://www.cbuilding.org) is a company with $3 million in annual revenues, eighteen full-time staff members, and a global network of twelve affiliates. It is now managed by my former students and works on a wide range of disputes ranging from conflicts over mineral extraction in Latin America and Africa; housing and energy facility siting issues in North America; conflicts over the land rights of indigenous peoples in the Middle East, North America, and South America; and local, regional, and national public policy controversies across the United States.

I have managed to put together a career as an academic at a top-tier university *and* as a practicing mediator. Much of what has happened in my career, though, has been serendipitous. I never had a game plan. While I would not presume to tell younger academic colleagues how to piece together careers as "pracademics" (tenured or tenure-track faculty who also maintain a dispute resolution practice), perhaps my story contains some useful lessons for them. In the course of developing this article, I have tried to respond to the primary question raised repeatedly by attendees at the Practice in the Academy conference: "Is it possible for dispute resolution professionals working today to get tenure at top-tier universities?"

Confessions

I never cared much whether the university was happy with what I did because I tried to maintain acceptable options "away from the table."

When I started teaching at MIT, I never planned to stay. I was committed to starting a practice as an urban planner focused on facilitating public engagement in community decision making. In fact, a few of my friends and I started a small consulting company while we were still in graduate school. We wanted to be ready to make a transition to the kinds of work that truly interested us.

When the financial realities of practice hit us, however, I was glad that the university offered me a temporary position as an assistant professor. As in all employment situations, having a good alternative to a negotiated agreement makes a difference. When the university's scholarly requirements, which I explain in the following, took me away from the work I wanted to do, I looked for ways of building a full-time practice. When the day-to-day demands of my consulting practice, which I was able to pursue on a part-time basis with the day-a-week and summers the university allowed me to practice, seemed overwhelming, I did what I could to keep my teaching and research options open. Knowing that I had a good alternative kept me going in both contexts.

My teachers were pracademics, so I thought that was normal.

This has always been the case in schools of architecture and planning and in some law schools, business schools, and engineering schools as well. In the architecture and urban planning fields, faculty have always maintained practices out of school and offered client-based studio courses or practicums that allow them to involve their students in client-based, problem-solving activities. In these workshop-oriented classes, students and faculty begin with problems in the field and find ways to meet the interests of their clients.

Law schools and business schools expect their faculty to consult, serve on boards of directors, and get involved with high-profile cases. The faculty in urban planning are able to present the plans or designs they produce

along with traditional published work when they come up for promotion or tenure. The university usually seeks feedback from communities or clients, along with letters from more traditional academic reviewers, when an urban planning professor is considered for promotion. Alongside traditional books and articles, reports describing studio work, field-based projects, and consulting assignments are accepted as evidence of professional accomplishment. Because faculty in these fields train the next generation of planners and designers, effectiveness in practice is a legitimate basis for promotion: it would be difficult to educate professional planners if one has never done any planning work himself. Of course, most universities also require evidence of more traditional scholarly output as well as impact on the field in the form of articles in peer-reviewed journals.

I enjoy teaching in all possible contexts.

I have taught grade school students, junior college students, undergraduates, graduate students, mid-career professionals, and corporate managers. I have also presented many hundreds of training courses for public officials, business managers, and activists around the world. Some faculty in the dispute resolution field only teach in university settings, and only teach semester-long courses. But, many also offer training, sometimes in the form of two- or three-day intensive workshops, either through their university's professional outreach program or under the banner of independent consulting; some offer such training online.

The differences between how a teacher conveys what he or she knows in fourteen weeks to full-time students enrolled in degree programs and how he or she delivers intensive professional training (often at substantial fees) are quite vivid. Translating the results of university-based scholarship into fee-for-service training takes a lot of work. Mid-career learners do not want to be passive recipients of lectures — they want all kinds of hands-on instruction, which requires a very different pedagogical repertoire. Thus, it is difficult to win the confidence of professional trainees when they can see that you have no practical experience yourself. Presenting how-to instruction in three to five hours to two hundred business executives, practicing attorneys, or long-time public officials is something that pracademics need to know how to do.

In my own case, I use the fees generated by professional training to support my more traditional scholarly work. I know this to also be true at PON. For more than thirty years, the program has offered two- and three-day negotiation training courses every year to groups of one hundred fifty or more mid-career professionals and has used the revenues earned to fund the program's research activities.

I've never been committed to or defined myself in terms of a single discipline, which has freed me from some of the assumptions about what "good research" requires.

Most university departments expect faculty to identify themselves as disciplinary experts. Even when the university encourages interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary research and teaching, it tends to do so by encouraging disciplinary experts to work together rather than by recruiting people who themselves take a transdisciplinary approach. But many pracademics have a transdisciplinary orientation, and some departments — like mine at MIT — are avowedly cross-disciplinary. Planners need to be eclectic or ecumenical in their choice of explanatory frameworks and analytic methods. I often combine concepts from fields as diverse as sociology, ecology, civil engineering, economics, international relations, management science, law, and public administration to be effective in a particular dispute resolution situation. Thus, when I write about my practice for journals in different fields, I need to speak the many languages involved. In a given year, I might write for a law review, a public administration journal, a science policy journal, an urban design journal, and a sociology journal. In order to make useful links between theory and practice, I must know and be able to build on concepts and methods from a number of fields. This can distance me from some of my more disciplinarily inclined colleagues, but this is one of the prices I pay to do the work I do.

I work more in the action research tradition than in the usual social science mode.

I measure success by whether a problem is resolved or addressed in a helpful way in the eyes of those seeking help, rather than relying on the approval of peer-reviewed journals. A growing dichotomy has developed in the applied social sciences between scholars who adopt a positivist empirical approach and those who operate in what is often called a post-positivist mode (Flyvbjerg 2001). Members of the first group use quantitative reasoning and conduct experiments in laboratory-like settings to build general theory in the way that natural scientists do. They use small social experiments to control what cannot be controlled in the world at large.

Although they try to simulate negotiating contexts of various kinds, and even offer small financial rewards, they know that the participants in these experiments (usually students) have no real stakes and that the complexity they have eliminated in order to control variables is, in fact, crucial to what happens in the real world.

The second group not only relies more on qualitative (e.g., anthropological) tools and participant observation, but has given up on the idea of building general social science theory in the systematic and experimental way that natural scientists do. Instead, they employ participatory action research techniques (Greenwood and Levin 2006). During the course of my career as an applied social scientist, I have worked in both styles.

I've always been more satisfied trying something myself (and trying to learn from that experience) than writing about what others have done.

I am convinced that dispute resolution professionals can improve what they do by carefully reflecting on their own work. This requires them — us — to be reflective practitioners (Argyris and Schon 1974, 1978). I often make my personal practice or experience the subject of my research. When I wrote *Breaking the Impasse* (1987), the publisher insisted that I disguise the descriptions of my own practice that are the focus of the book by fictionalizing the cases, arguing that more universal claims would be more powerful and more believable. At the last minute, though, my editor insisted that I add footnotes to each disguised case study to substantiate my findings and prescriptions. The footnotes, of course, revealed exactly what the real life cases were and that the "stories" in the book were based on my own experience. Sometimes, as pracademics, we must go to great length to make our work seem legitimate to more traditional social scientists.

Pracademics write about their own experience as a means of self-assessment. In addition, they write not just as participant observers, as many anthropologists and sociologists have for decades, but as characters in their own stories, which can alienate many of their academic colleagues.

The best way to get tenure now is to invest seven years in a combination of things including some that would not normally be at the top of my list. Action research on its own will not produce the kind of academic record that most universities require.

I am often asked to serve as an outside reviewer for promotion and tenure cases at other universities. Each academic department sends along copies of the published books, articles, and reports they want reviewers to evaluate. They also spell out their tenure requirements: outstanding scholarly performance (i.e., impact on a discipline or field), teaching capabilities, and service to the community and the profession. Scholarly output and quality is usually measured in terms of the number and quality of publications in refereed journals. After six or seven years, academics on a tenure track are expected to show a substantial number of publications that have been reviewed and cited repeatedly.

As a reviewer, I am supposed to read all that material and offer a judgment about the candidate's qualifications for promotion or tenure. In recent years, I have noted that departments are increasingly emphasizing the importance of publications in traditional, high impact–factor academic journals. I have seen no commensurate increase in the attention paid to the kind of field-based interventions that pracademics value.

When I think about what I had produced by the end of six years as a professor in the early 1980s, I am not sure I would qualify for tenure today with the same record. Had senior faculty in my department not taken my community interventions seriously, I might not have been promoted. If action research and other forms of practice-related scholarship (including first-hand accounts of dispute resolution efforts in which the author has

been involved) do not "count" in tenure considerations, it will be difficult for pracademics to earn long-term faculty appointments.

They could, of course, commit the first six or seven years of their academic life to doing what their universities expect. After that, they can then spend the remaining thirty to forty years of their academic lives being pracademics. The lesson for me is that pracademics need to choose their academic departments carefully, to consider whether the department in question will consider practice as a fit criterion for tenure. I worry, however, that young pracademics will be less bold in selecting their practice engagements.

I have always moved from practice to theory and not the other way around.

One kind of social scientist formulates a theoretical idea or hypothesis and looks for opportunities to test it, while a different kind prefers to start with a problem in the world and joins forces with relevant stakeholders to work out responses to their "real life" problems. That a preformulated hypothesis can be proven using quantitative analyses of carefully collected data is taken for granted.

So, for example, if I think that adding more parties to a dispute resolution effort would lead to the emergence of blocking coalitions, I should be able to test that assumption by gathering and analyzing evidence about a great many similar dispute resolution efforts involving different-sized groups. I could survey or interview the participants multiple times and analyze the products of their interaction. As long as I can compare enough cases that are sufficiently similar in all respects — except with regard to the variable that interests me most — I can use statistical techniques to prove whether my hypothesis is confirmed or disconfirmed. Such research would please many of my social science colleagues. Pracademics in the dispute resolution field, however, are more concerned with making an effort to help stakeholders in multiparty disputes work out their differences. In addition, a pracademic might want to analyze the coalitional strategies actually used in a particular intervention (and perhaps in related cases) in an effort to help clarify how these strategies work.

The findings and prescriptions generated by such an analysis are likely to be viewed skeptically by more traditional social scientists for at least three reasons:

• a single case without proper "controls" provides little or no basis for confirming or disconfirming one explanation or hypothesis about what happened;

• the involvement of the pracademic as a participant in the case means that his or her ability to report what happened in an objective way has been compromised; and

- efforts to identify the prescriptive implications of the case will be suspect because they may be nothing more than a reflection of the ideological biases of the person doing the reporting.

  Participatory action researchers, in response, would argue that

- they can learn much more about causal dynamics from an in-depth study of a single case than they can from a statistical analysis of correlations based on superficial reports from a large data set;

- only the parties involved in a particular case would be close enough to the action to be able to make sense of what really happened; and

- the move from analysis to prescription will be much more believable and trustworthy if it is confirmed by the ex-post reflections of the actual participants.

I have been in the middle of this debate for decades — it will never be resolved.

My methods are cross-contextual.

Pracademics are constantly on the lookout for cross-contextual insights. Global treaty making, for example, is likely to be seen by some analysts as a focus of international relations or international law. I see it as just another form of public dispute resolution. I am constantly trying to abstract from my experience in one sector to see how it might apply in other situations.

If, for example, a labor mediator has positive results to report about his or her efforts to resolve a strike, pracademics who work as mediators in community disputes or family dispute settings may be interested to hear what that mediator has learned. They are looking for anything that might spark an insight into their own effectiveness and expand their toolkit. The fact that culture, or some other contextual feature, might make it difficult to apply what is learned in one setting to another is, of course, a valid concern. But "knowing" something in such situations is useful if it inspires a practitioner to think in a fresh way; it is not necessary to parse all the reasons that contextual differences might limit cross-contextual applications.

Linking the Worlds of Theory and Practice

The previous discussed confessions are meant to explain why I think that pracademics can and should try to survive in academic settings. I realize that not everyone will follow my path and, more importantly, that times have changed. But I nevertheless want to offer some general prescriptive advice for pracademics at the beginning of their professional lives. I have

**Figure One
The Circle of Engagement**

LINKING THE WORLDS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

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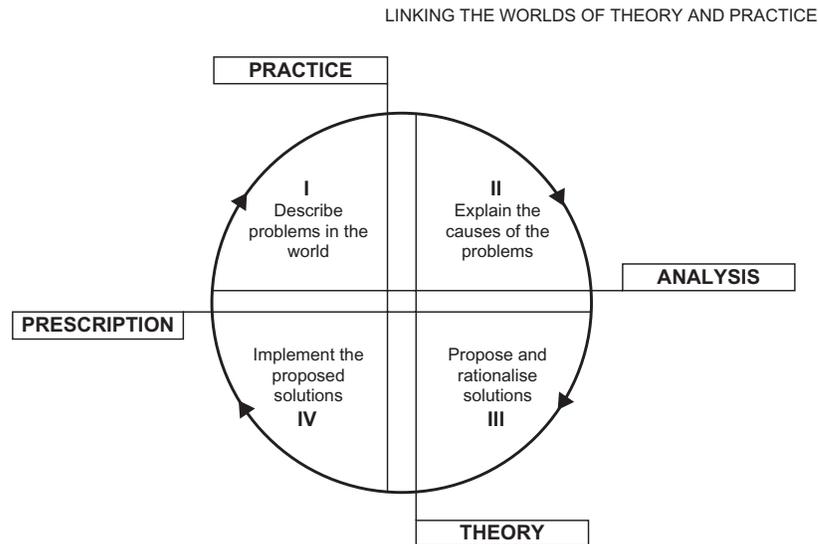
illustrated my ideas with two diagrams depicting what I call "The Circle of Engagement."

The first diagram (Figure One) summarizes my thoughts about the connections between theory and practice. In the quadrant on the upper left (I), I have placed efforts to *describe* problems in the real world. This is certainly a task we expect scholars in the social sciences as well as journalists and many others to take on. They use data from the world of practice.

In the upper right quadrant (II), I have placed efforts to *explain* the causes of the problems described in the first quadrant. This is a second, traditional task of academics and reflects a commitment to formulating generalized theories and predictions about categories of activities in the world at large.

The quadrant on the lower right (III) focuses on *formulating and making a case for* (rationalizing) solutions to the problems noted in the first quadrant. Some social scientists take on this task, but more traditional scientists are generally uncomfortable in this role. The leap from "is" to "ought" requires nonobjective, possibly even political judgments that academics might be willing to make as people, but that they may not believe are justified by their academic expertise.

The quadrant on the lower left (IV) emphasizes *taking action* with regard to the problems noted in the first quadrant. I describe this generally as "implementing the solutions" proposed in the third quadrant. We would expect to see these efforts undertaken by practitioners rather than scholars. Thus, the upper half of the circle chart focuses on analysis while the lower half emphasizes prescription. The left side of the chart focuses on what happens in practice while the right side focuses on efforts to formulate general theory. This circle chart, originated by my late colleague Roger Fisher, sets the stage for a discussion of the ways in which pracademics might organize their professional lives (Fisher and Ury 1981).

Most pracademics want to operate in all four quadrants. They certainly want to be involved in the fourth quadrant. Unfortunately, anything they do below the line (in quadrants III and IV) makes their traditional social science colleagues uncomfortable. In the university, scholars are judged by what they do above the line (in quadrants one and two). Time spent working on quadrants three and four raises eyebrows in traditional social science departments because it is time not spent on traditional scholarly pursuits.
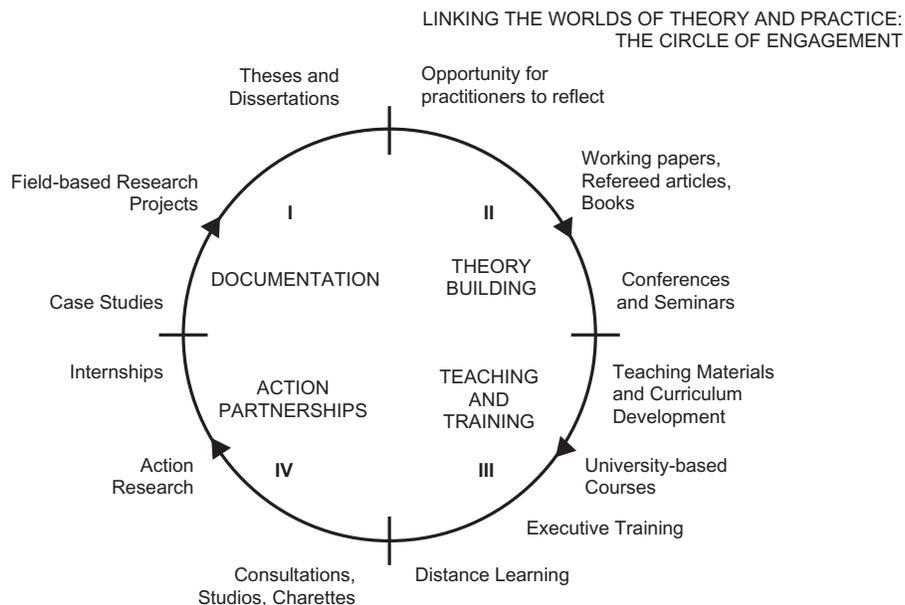
Traditional social scientists truly believe that the work of their colleagues in quadrants one and two can be peer-reviewed, that is, judged objectively. They worry that work done by academics in quadrants three and four can only be reviewed in political or nonobjective terms and thus should not be part of a university-based promotion review.

Pracademics who want their work in the field to be used as a basis for promotion are disappointed to learn that university administrators discourage this. Universities that add "service" as an additional consideration in promotion reviews, and most do, might be willing to consider efforts in the fourth quadrant as a basis for tenure, but service is rarely counted equally with scholarship, certainly not at top-tier institutions. Further, many universities will consider only service to the university and professional or disciplinary associations, but not require service to the world at large. (I will discuss teaching, a fourth consideration in promotion and tenure reviews, in the following.)

Exceptions to this model include many architecture and engineering schools that consider practice in the fourth quadrant as a basis for promotion. The judgment of peers, however, rather than clients (i.e., the people affected by whatever is designed or built) with regard to the work in quadrant four is still the primary consideration. Pracademics themselves care more about the assessments of the clients of their interventions than they do about the judgment of their academic peers. Thus, even in academic departments in which work in the fourth quadrant is valued, the basis for judging the quality of such efforts runs counter to what pracademics value.

The second diagram (Figure Two) looks at the Circle of Engagement in a different way. I suggest ways in which pracademics might rename the four

Figure Two
The Circle of Engagement, Redesigned

LINKING THE WORLDS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE:
THE CIRCLE OF ENGAGEMENT

Theses and Dissertations

Opportunity for practitioners to reflect

Field-based Research Projects

Working papers, Refereed articles, Books

I — DOCUMENTATION

II — THEORY BUILDING

Conferences and Seminars

Case Studies

Internships

ACTION PARTNERSHIPS

TEACHING AND TRAINING

Teaching Materials and Curriculum Development

Action Research

IV

III

University-based Courses

Executive Training

Consultations, Studios, Charettes

Distance Learning

quadrants and use the Circle of Engagement to explain to their more traditional, less applied, colleagues what they do and why.

Quadrant one is defined as *documentation*. Quadrant two is renamed *theory building*. Quadrant three is now focused on *teaching and training* and quadrant four is renamed *action partnerships*. Even the best universities in the world claim to value teaching and training. A great many institutions of higher learning are now moving to create action partnerships that allow their students (both undergraduate and graduate) to engage in the world at large as part of their pre-professional and professional studies. This reflects an increasing emphasis on "learning by doing" and "learning about the world."

The revised circle chart can be used to explain how more than a dozen teaching, research, and service activities fit together in a virtuous cycle. A virtuous cycle is defined as "a self-propagating advantageous situation in which a successful solution leads to more of a desired result or another success."

I will use my own situation to illustrate. At PON at Harvard Law School, we maintain a clearinghouse of teaching exercises and case studies (http://www.pon.org). These are detailed accounts of dispute resolution or

negotiation practice, often accompanied by teaching notes. "The Great Negotiator" series produced by James Sebenius at Harvard Business School is a wonderful example (see Sebenius 2011). These are detailed case studies of how some of the most effective negotiators in the world explain their successes. At CBI, one of my functions as chief knowledge officer is to help the staff produce written reflections on their practice, summarizing what they have learned. This serves as both marketing material for CBI and as an open source of information that we hope will be of value to other practitioners. Some graduate students at MIT and Harvard have prepared theses and dissertations that are even more detailed accounts of what has happened in particular practice situations. These are often wrapped inside of analytic efforts to test certain propositions. While these scholarly efforts move to the second quadrant, theory building, they begin with detailed accounts of dispute resolution and conflict management efforts in the field.

At MIT's Science Impact Collaborative (http://www.scienceimpact.mit.edu) and at PON, my doctoral students work in the second quadrant to assist me in building theory across cases. We interact with other theory builders around the world and seek to publish in refereed journals in ways that traditional social scientists will find convincing. In the process, we seek to extend certain frontiers of knowledge, particularly those examining which public dispute resolution efforts are successful or not and why.

We also develop role-play simulations to support teaching and training, which would fall into the third quadrant. Looking ahead, I expect video-based teaching materials built around actual interventions in the field to supplant paper-based role-play simulations. Pracademics can use carefully constructed video accounts of their field-based practice as input into their classroom teaching and share these globally.

We also need to develop protocols to help students learn from internships and field-based projects. Reflective practice guidelines and procedures will allow pracademics to help students learn from and about real-world activities. Pracademics should provide leadership in preparing these for their universities. My goal in the third quadrant is to train more teachers *and* practitioners. This nurtures the virtuous cycle because these individuals "make a market" for all the work done in the other quadrants.

In the fourth quadrant, I seek to build action research partnerships that will enable new students to engage in field-based learning (for clients) that will deepen and broaden their professional training. Often it is alumni of the MIT and Harvard programs who head the agencies and organizations that become the leaders of new action research partnerships. Sometimes these partnerships involve university departments in particular communities over a long period. At MIT, the department of urban studies and planning has maintained ongoing field-based practicums in the cities of Lawrence, Massachusetts, and New Orleans for many years. In both

instances, student interns have subsequently been hired by city agencies as full-time staff and become liaisons for student interns, creating another virtuous cycle.

CBI works with practitioners seeking help in the field. Full-time staff provide dispute resolution services, but student interns often participate. Students are paid for this work, supplementing the financial aid they receive from the university — academic departments are increasingly eager to find paying internships for their students. Pracademics based in university departments ought to be able to help students find such opportunities and assist them to bridge their classroom work and their work in the field.

Conclusion

What the second version of the Circle of Engagement shows is that pracademics can frame what they do in all four quadrants in ways that can help them succeed in their university careers. Instead of complaining about or battling with traditional social science colleagues to get "practice" counted as a form of scholarship, they can use what they do in the field, in the form of action research, to shore up their teaching and training and as part of ongoing efforts to build action partnerships; many universities are making efforts to more fully develop and expand these activities. Pracademics must also produce published work that demonstrates their ability to use traditional social science research methods. If they refuse to do this, they will not succeed in the university. This work, however, can be focused on field-based practice but must go beyond self-reflection or purely descriptive accounts of practice (quadrant one).

In my opinion, pracademics need to do well in all four quadrants to win long-term university appointments. They might do exceptionally well in two of the four quadrants (perhaps quadrants two and four), from the university's standpoint, and acceptably in the other two. I believe that they need not separate their university life from their practice-oriented life — they can merge these if they are able to create the virtuous cycle that I have suggested.

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