Responsible, Rigorous, and Impactful Research Through Engagement

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Research Ecosystems, Partnerships and Collective Know-How

The call for business higher education to be more impactful is growing louder and more articulate. The Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) were launched in 2007, the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) movement formalised in 2016, and the AACSB standards on societal impact for business school accreditation were updated in 2020. These advances, along with the widespread general adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, are indications within just the past decade or so that the paradigm of business higher education is shifting. This is a generational drive with the intention to align business education and research with societal goals, and it is only accelerating. No longer can an institution of business higher education simply focus on shareholder primacy, graduating student pay scales, or elite rankings. More is expected, and more is demanded.

This call for impactful research and education is not new in U.S. business higher education. Agricultural experiment stations attached to land grant universities were established under the Hatch Act in 1887 to "aid in acquiring and diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects connected with agriculture … and such other research or experiments bearing directly on the agricultural industry of the United States" (Moore, 1988, pp. 164-165). Over 40% of the 1887 workforce was directly employed in agriculture (Lebergott, 1966, Table 2), and approximately 65% of the US population lived in rural areas (U.S. Census, 2004, Table 18). This clarion call of 1887 was not so different than advocating for business colleges today to be ever more relevant to business and society.

What *is* different today? Impactful research and teaching seem to be at odds with what Gerry Johnson and Ken Starkey criticise as the management academy's self-contained research-publication-funding 'iron cage', the unintended result being increasing irrelevance. Andrew Hoffman in *The Engaged Scholar* (2021) similarly argues that research publishing success serves the academic institution primarily and falls short on serving the world at large. Without questioning the value of sound methodology and evidence-based arguments, today's scholars are adding the value of well-designed and observed experience to the expansion of practical knowledge. This moment in time is the point at which society at large is compelled to strike a balance between the practices we need to trust and keep, and those we need to change.

Responsibility, rigour, and impact with relevance to stakeholders constitute the trifecta of intentions to which business higher education researchers must aspire.

A VIRTUOUS CYCLE OF ENGAGEMENT AND RESEARCH

Scholarship with a disciplinary focus at peer-reviewed journals with the highest academic standards will always remain at the core of research that is responsible, rigorous, and impactful. But there is more to be done.

Figure 1 below illustrates how stimulating innovative research can, and often does, start with curiosity-driven scholarship motivated by the value-chain of research in the academy. But when scholars engage with industry and society in real-world challenges, curiosity drives scholarship in turn, and the resulting research feedback loop is more likely to create positive societal effect. This virtuous cycle is maintained when research employs sound methodology, when it adheres to the guiding principles of the open-science movement, and when it follows from evidence-based arguments in the face of real-world advocates and the need for immediacy.

At the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business, we support a two-pronged strategy for building scholarly, engaged research. First, we have an expansive ecosystem of centres, institutes, and special programme initiatives (C&Is) that serve as an engagement channel, leveraging long and deep industry and societal connections. While these C&Is do not always involve students in their many activities, most do. Our second prong, by contrast, puts the student right at the centre of this virtuous engagement cycle through for-credit community-engaged learning projects which include industry partners.

THE ENGAGEMENT CHANNEL OF CENTRES, INSTITUTES, AND PROGRAMME INITIATIVES

Comprised of three separate yet integrated business schools – the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, the Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration, and the Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management – the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business prides itself on being a place 'where business breadth meets specialised depth'. Our two dozen centres, institutes, and programme initiatives exemplify this, providing an organisational infrastructure for industry and societal engagement[1]. As is typical of most academic centres or institutes at other business schools and colleges, our C&Is host convening events ranging from by-invitation advisory boards and roundtables to large, open conferences. Few of these convenings are solely attended by or targeted to academia; the vast majority are purposefully designed to attract industry or government experts, along with academics, bridging scholarship and decision-making to real world challenges.

In 2022, our C&Is welcomed more than 210 industry leaders and experts in-person, on campus. Annually, they engage 200+ industry executives as members of C&I by-invitation advisory boards or councils.

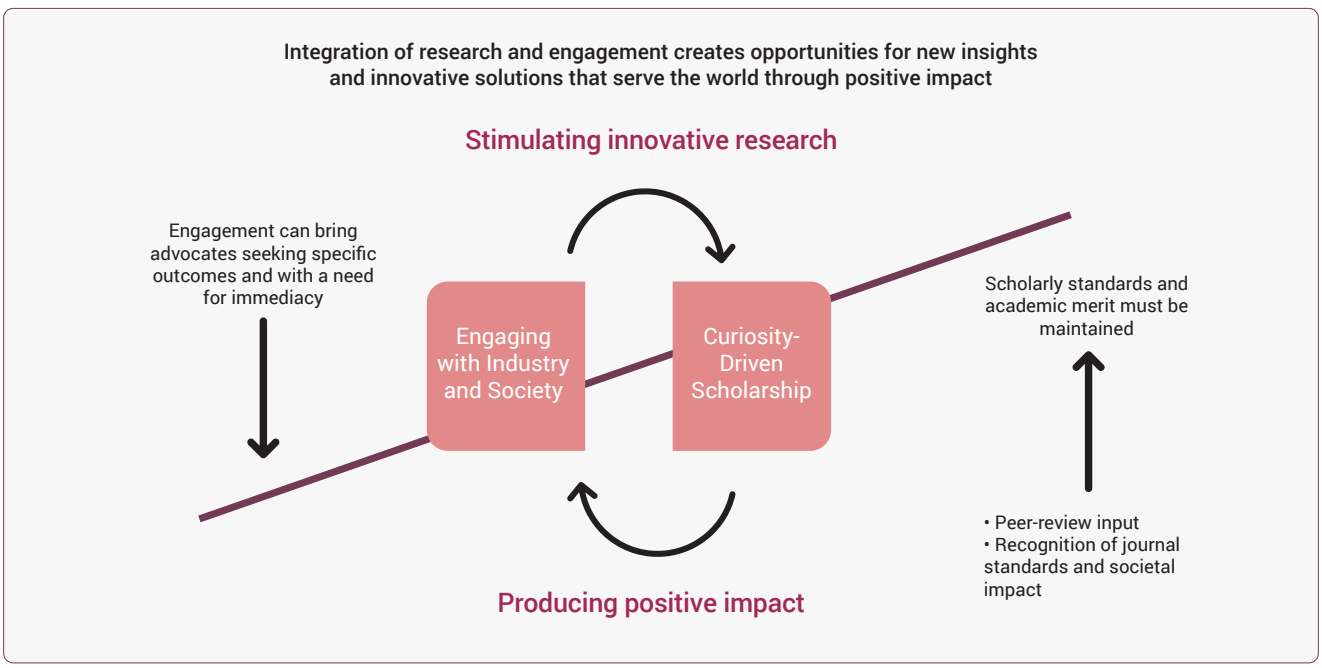

Figure 1 How to Strike the Research Balance in Driving for Impact

How does this ecosystem of C&Is work to create curiosity-driven research that is rigorous and relevant? We regularly canvas our faculty colleagues after one of these conferences or roundtables to remain focused on continuous improvement of format and topics. Following are selected responses from our faculty surveyed about the value of presenting at a C&I roundtable:

Faculty Member 1. "Yes, the experience was super useful! I like how the audience offers industry insights there. …this paper is currently a working paper. We plan to submit it soon."

Faculty Member 2. "My experience was extremely positive. First of all, there are quite a few corporate decision-makers in the room. I got a few good comments and questions during my presentation. In addition, I have scheduled 4-5 follow-up one-on-one meetings [from which] I have benefited a lot. …Some were willing to provide me with data for further research if necessary. I especially appreciate the realistic view of the industry. They also show trust and passion for academic research. They are willing to learn from us, which motivates me to do a good job of digging out deeper. They want the research practical and actionable."

Faculty Member 3. "I did find the experience to be highly beneficial and helpful. The participants … offered me valuable feedback on my research and helped me appreciate how my work could address practical challenges faced by the hospitality sector."

Faculty Member 4. "I received great feedback from the audience, and I was later able to get better data through connections made at the roundtable. The paper will soon be submitted to a journal and hopefully published soon."

Faculty Member 5. "I received good feedback and attendees seemed very willing to help if I needed it. A few months later, I needed data on the topic of the presentation so I asked [to be put] in contact with someone who can help… We're now working with [company] on a research project."

The research presented and referenced in these comments has included publications appearing in peer-reviewed, scholarly business journals, for example, Fuchs *et al.* (2022); Sampson and Shi (2023).

Our colleague Professor Yao Cui reported how his research investigating the heterogeneous treatments of tax policies in the hospitality sharing-economy benefited from such roundtable interactions. In reference to his joint work with Professor Andrew Davis (Cui and Davis, 2022), Cui explained, "I presented my research about the impact of occupancy tax regulation on Airbnb, and the [Centre] board members not only recognised the importance of my findings but also shared their perspectives on how this regulation could affect different segments of hotels. The discussions were thought-provoking and have inspired me to explore related topics for future research. …Their vast knowledge and intellectual acumen have enriched my perspective on hospitality research."

A sizable number of our C&Is have achieved the level of trust and exchange necessary to support the virtuous cycle of engagement and scholarship described in the faculty comments above. But not all. There are challenges to collaborating closely with employers – academic timelines and rigour, identifying a key organisational contact, gaining the trust of the organisation, negotiating research participation specifics. University research protocols on proprietary data can also present unique challenges. Both the scholars and the industry partners must recognise sufficient benefit for the engagement to be successful and of lasting value (Barrington, 2016). Our longer-running C&Is have established stronger industry and community connections. Building these relationships and shaping the format of convening events to best foster mutually beneficial exchanges take purposeful action, reflection, patience, resources, and a lot of good preparation.

With this large number of C&Is (particularly for a business college), it will not be surprising to learn that we have also been able to benefit from *joint* C&I convening events that bring even wider connections between faculty and the outside world. One example is the Cornell ESG Investing Research Conference that we launched in 2022 and that we plan to continue for years to come. This collaboration takes place between the Centre for Sustainable Global Enterprise and the Parker Centre for Investment Research, along with two college-funded interdisciplinary themes, Investing@Cornell and Business of Sustainability, which build communities of like-minded faculty colleagues. This conference included speakers representing large asset managers, asset owners, as well as regulatory officials from New York Federal Reserve Bank and the IMF in an active two-day event. The conference attracted groundbreaking research presentations and paired them up with conversations on best practices and policy impacting investment in biodiversity, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and advancing ESG priorities.

A SECOND ENGAGEMENT CHANNEL - COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING

The second prong of our engaged research strategy is our dynamic and expanding work in community-engaged learning. This primarily entails for-credit course projects which put the student at the centre of the virtuous impact cycle, working with external organisations or businesses to address a real-world challenge. These engagements can stimulate curiosity-driven research on the part of faculty teaching the course as well as the students themselves.

Community-engaged learning (CEL), as applied in our college, seeks to deepen the age-old wisdom that we become expert through experience - that we do, in fact, learn by doing. Students are guided by rigorous academic standards to develop measurable solutions for external organisations, including major multinationals, financial institutions, local not-for-profits, NGOs, or government agencies. As they develop connections through respectful, shared problem-solving, they own and feel agency about the project work they do. Their learning is deepened by the work's usefulness outside the classroom, while simultaneously putting their curricular lessons to the test. To fully fit our college's CEL definition, students deliver a critical reflection whereby they pause and examine how their experience benefited or could better benefit 'stakeholders beyond shareholders'. The reflection, overseen by the instructor of record, allows the student to align the project's work with one or more of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

A SMART EXAMPLE

Our college's commitment to connecting students with the real world is well exemplified in the work of the Student Multidisciplinary Applied Research Teams (SMART) programme. For the past two decades, this internationally focused community-engaged learning programme has been pairing teams of graduate and undergraduate students and faculty from within our college and across Cornell University with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and community organisations in emerging markets and less-developed economies. Many of the projects focus on agriculture, healthcare, the environment, and women's economic development. Course curriculum meets problem-solving as students address specific issues and catalyse inclusive and sustainable development, providing technical and analytical assistance to underserved businesses and communities. SMART experiences promote direct student understanding of the challenges faced by emerging markets and the role of business and business tools in private-and public-sector-led economic development. Since its founding by Professor Ralph Christy in 2004, SMART has led 123 projects, engaging over a thousand students and 101 community partners from 27 countries.

Multiple stakeholders are engaged in these compelling projects. Faculty are in the field with graduate students and undergraduates, who earn experience as research assistants in addition to course credit. SMART is based on a co-learning and co-teaching curriculum and approach, therefore both undergraduates and graduate students participate in all aspects of the project (e.g., team leadership, data collection, analysis, and case writing). The community partner benefits from upskilling as they simultaneously contribute to an academic research project. Assignments are well-defined and structured to provide tangible benefits to the partner and students alike. Pre- and post-sessions reinforce this fieldwork learning, such that SMART projects foster relationships that develop cultural understandings and deepen students' cultural humility and respect.

Many of the SMART projects stem from the research interest, outreach, and teaching of key faculty, who serve as SMART mentors on a voluntary basis. Some SMART projects are pitched by Cornell students or alumni who were previous SMART students themselves. All SMART projects are modelled using an empirical research approach and development theory framework, based on two essential components: (i) formulation of the problem statement encapsulating the community partner's main problem and its effects, and (ii) operationalisation of key variables that allow students to transform abstract concepts into tangible indicators that can be systematically examined and analysed.

Consider several recent SMART projects as examples.

The CARL Group, Rwanda. The founder of CARL Group learned of SMART through a special agribusiness workshop in South Africa hosted by Professor Christy. SMART assistance was then requested with various entrepreneurial development assets supporting the youth-led company in its production and marketing of innovative, orange-fleshed sweet potato bread, a nutritious tool in fighting malnutrition. SMART has collaborated with the CARL group over the last five years to support both its product and market development strategies. Most recently, SMART is supporting the company to identify the most effective ways to penetrate and grow sales in school feeding programmes and small retail outlets serving vulnerable populations. In 2020, SMART helped the company to standardise its bread production and develop a nutritional label that led to it receiving the first Rwanda Standards Board quality certificate. As of January 2023, their bread remained the only quality-assured bread being sold in Kigali. The company founder, Regis Umugiraneza, is looking at how to sustainably grow and expand his business further, making an even greater impact addressing vitamin-A deficiency in Rwanda.

E&E Green Farms, Rwanda. Seeking a way to diversify the family income during the COVID-19 pandemic, Rose Muhumuza started E&E Greens, a seed production company that specialises in the production of hybrid maize seeds, soybean and biofortified seeds that are sold in both local (farmers, agro-dealers, NGOs, and farmer cooperatives) and export markets (Tanzania and other African countries). Ms. Muhumuza was introduced to the SMART project through another SC Johnson College programme, the Cornell Hanga Ahazaza project. Funded by the Mastercard Foundation, Hanga Ahazaza focused on workforce development in the hospitality and tourism industry. Ms. Muhumuza successfully completed the Cornell Hanga Ahazaza certificate programme which included skill-building in many business basics such as marketing and customer service. The next step was to develop a robust marketing and communication strategy. The SMART programme students and post-doctoral fellow assisted by conducting market research and developing a social media plan that included a new company logo, content, and branding guidelines.

The Humble Store, South Africa. Humble is a start-up company founded by Kamilah Karaan, in Stellenbosch. Through an exclusive business agreement with Olyberg (one of South Africa's leading olive farms), Kamilah procures fresh harvested olives to develop cosmetic products (such as soaps and face creams) and ready-to-consume oils and spiced olives. Kamala collaborated with SMART to identify a strategic direction that would help her to realise the founding vision of the company. Students engaged in every step of the project, including defining the final deliverables (desired product), and assisting in meeting organisation, language translation, and data interpretation.

While focused on international emerging markets, the SMART programme has also included underserved economies within the United States. For example, following UN SDG guidelines, SMART team projects have assessed ESG dimensions of tourism in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Given that the primary SMART faculty leaders are focused on entrepreneurship within emerging markets, projects offer opportunities for students to explore and gain first-hand experience on such wide-ranging topics as uncertain or limited market access, inadequate infrastructure, corruption, and financial capital, and more. The students' immersions in their partners' communities, helping the businesses to grow and develop through intensive projects with deadlines, informs critical reflection of their role. It is this last piece of the puzzle – the critical reflection – which we believe advances awareness for every student on stakeholder impact broadly.

TRANSFORMING ENGAGEMENT CHANNEL ACTION INTO KNOWLEDGE CREATION

SMART teams have written and published various case studies in peer-reviewed journals, such as the *Journal of Agribusiness in Developing and Emerging Economies* (JADEE)*, Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies, and International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*. In 2011, the programme compiled and published a book, *Case Studies of Emerging Farmers and Agribusinesses in South Africa* (Mabaya *et al*., 2011), which has been adopted in classrooms and executive education programmes. In 2018, Cornell jointly organised Advanced Agribusiness Workshops with the Asian Productivity Organisation, and eight of the 12 resulting case studies appeared in the volume *Asian Agribusiness Management: Case Studies in Growth,*

Marketing, and Upgrading Strategies. They were developed for these workshops by graduate students in SMART (Christy *et al*., 2018).

The research acumen that SMART helps to build brings with it other positive impacts, like improved quality of life, security, health, and income. First, the community benefits from the development of the SMART partner business. Most of our business partners have a significant focus on social impact, such as job creation for women, improved community nutrition, or the provision of markets to smallholder farmers. As SMART teams help business partners to grow and develop, the social impact of these businesses also grows, benefiting the community as a whole. Additionally, many community members interact with our students through interviews, stakeholder meetings, and even simple casual interactions, exposing both the community and our students to diverse cultures, expanding intercultural skills.

From among the thousand Cornell undergraduate and graduate students who have completed a SMART project, programme leaders have been able to track down former students now holding prominent leadership positions within the international development sector and in multilateral and international organisations, such as the United Nations, TechnoServe, Catholic Relief Services, and Botswana Institute for Development. Others are policymakers affiliated with various government agencies (in USA, Netherlands, Mongolia, Botswana). Many are researchers and educators within internationally renowned colleges like Cornell, Stanford, UC Berkeley, Purdue, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Peking University.

Faculty play a crucial role in meeting with each potential partner to understand their needs, assess the project's potential benefits, and then guide the student teams. Everyone involved collaborates with partners to build up businesses that expand opportunities for underserved populations. This in-depth understanding and direct oversight feeds curiosity-driven and engaged scholarship.

ALIGNED WITH A LARGER COLLEGE STRATEGY

In addition to the value SMART provides for curiosity-driven research, it has expanded strategic importance to the SC Johnson College. While SMART has existed for decades, in the few years since 2016, our college has adopted a revolutionary Grand Challenge curriculum for the Dyson School and incorporated a full Engaged College Initiative. The Dyson Grand Challenge is a three-part, three-year course sequence embedded into the Dyson curriculum, each course building a foundation for the next and culminating in a team-based capstone project, which aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The Engaged College Initiative, begun in 2020, aspires to provide every student passing through our college an opportunity for hands-on learning about which they critically reflect. Students examine their own role in the process, observe the changes in their thinking on furthering sustainability and improving diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, and determine how their work benefited or could benefit stakeholders beyond shareholders[2]. SMART projects offer a key pathway for meeting the Dyson School's unique Grand Challenge graduation requirement and for contributing opportunities for engagement aligned with this new college initiative, as well as stimulating curiosity-driven research.

There is another angle to research and engaged learning – in which what is discussed and taught gets researched. Since 2017, Professor Todd Schmit, faculty director of Cornell's Cooperative Enterprise Program, has included engaged learning projects at the undergraduate and graduate level in his Dyson School Cooperative Business Management courses. On the research benefits for faculty stemming from engaged learning projects, Schmit and co-authors (2022) write how the engaged-learning course projects "allow for pre-testing of industry or firm surveys and applied research methods. They also provide access to firm data not available from other sources." Reports from faculty involved with our centres, institutes, and programme initiatives (including those testimonials above) tell similar stories of the research benefits of engaging with industry.

RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH THROUGH ENGAGEMENT – A PARTING THOUGHT

While we must guard our highest standards of scholarship and academic merit, the relevance of management research to stakeholders is just as critical as rigour and credibility. Each of these –relevance, rigour, and credibility – represent the vital three pillars of the Responsible Research in Business and Management movement (RRBM, Tsui *et al*., 2022). [In full disclosure, EFMD was a founding sponsor of RRBM and one of the co-authors, Karolyi, currently serves as RRBM's Global Chair.] What we offer here is that the integration of research and engagement creates undeniable opportunities for curiosity-driven scholarship, new insights, and innovative solutions. All of these are imperatives toward rendering positive societal impact. We are, after all, responsible for educating the future scholars and managers who will tackle the incredible grand challenges faced by society and business. Our courage and clear-eyed creativity must be put into action.

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Footnotes

[1] https://business.cornell.edu/faculty-research/centers-institutes/

[2] Our consideration of the term 'stakeholder' extends that presented in the classic work, Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach (Freeman, 1984). In considering 'stakeholders beyond shareholders', we hope students will further recognise stakeholders as cross-generational, including those affected in the future by today's business accomplishments.

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