

Reflection by Dr. Tim Kenyon, Vice-President, Research

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*Research exists to make a difference.*

This might look like a platitude; at least, it ought to seem a platitude. But when we take it seriously, it turns out to have some substantive implications.

Is it true? Platitudes sometimes aren't, but this one is. Whether our research is basic or applied in its design and conception, curiosity-driven or contract-based, we researchers are all committed at some level to the idea that research exists to make a difference.

No funding agency or scholarly institution has ever rallied to support inquiry under the banner of changing nothing whatsoever, and mattering to no one at all. As for researchers, yes, we are a highly varied group. But I doubt that any of us ever got into academic study excited by the prospect of our work never being read, never finding application, never changing anyone's way of thinking or acting. Nobody ever looked forward to reflecting on a long, productive research career, and noting with satisfaction that it was like it had never happened.

But if research should make a difference, then as both a researcher and a research administrator I have some questions to ask myself. Some apply to me as a scholar:

- What am I doing to maximize the impact my work has among my disciplinary (or same-problem-focused) academic peers?
- What am I doing to promote the uptake of my work by academic peers working in different fields, or on different problems?
- What specific positive steps am I taking to make my scholarship, my expertise, and my creative labour accessible to community organizations and citizens who might find it illuminating and informative?
- Markets are among the most powerful forms of connections and impact in existence; what am I doing to determine whether my work can make a difference via commercialization?
- How am I taking steps to explain my research through popular media and news media?

Other questions apply to me as a research administrator and member of a research collegium:

- What I am doing to help my colleagues maximize the impact of their research and creativity?

- What seminars and training can we offer on effective academic publication - including discussion of the different conceptions of effectiveness itself that may be relevant?
- How does my institution support, not just specific transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary projects, but research conduct in general that invites transdisciplinary uptake and partnership?
- How does my institution promote, facilitate, celebrate, and valorize the engagement of researchers and the impact of their work with community organizations?
- What support does my institution offer for the commercialization of research outputs of all kinds, where the opportunities exist?
- What training, support, and clarity of practices does my institution offer to researchers to facilitate their effective outreach via traditional media, new media, social media, and other forms of mass communication?

Where I work at Brock, there are many good answers to these questions that can be read off existing events, practices, and values. But these remain serious and often difficult questions. They all flow quite directly from our taking seriously the idea that researchers want their work to make a difference.

For my part, I was never mentored in graduate school to think of the wider impact of my research as the sort of thing in which I should take a strong interest, or about which I might even have scholarly duties. As a result, I still find it an effort to expand the minimalist understanding of proper scholarly aims that I learned as a young researcher. And I work at weeding out the subtle but definite attitudes that I internalized from both professors and graduate peers, to the effect that to seek non-academic uptake of one's work was to show too much ambition, or in any case the wrong kind of ambition. No doubt I circulated those attitudes myself, in turn! Designing my own scholarship to make it accessible and applicable is now an ongoing project - much of it still in the planning stages.

It is not uncommon for academic researchers to be vexed by the low regard in which knowledge and expertise are popularly held these days. People ought to take the insights and knowledge of scientists and scholars more seriously, we are inclined to think. But look: something has gone wrong if we enjoin the wider world to value academic research, while we treat as marginal or impure the effort and the disposition to bring scholarship to the widest audience, in forms that enable its uptake and application. To will the end is to will the means. And willing the means is much, much more than just allowing the means to count somewhat towards tenure or annual performance appraisals! It requires us to design our inquiries and our institutions accordingly.

I am heartened and proud to see how much my colleagues are doing to ensure that research makes a difference. I hope we can continue to challenge ourselves to

national and international academic leadership in this regard: to recognize our successes as an institution that values difference-making research, and to expand our commitment to still greater success.