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Audited engagement: Making agri-food community development "count" in higher education and beyond

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Abstract

Community engagement is central to work in agriculture, food systems, and community development, especially within land-grant universities and extension programs. Recently, these efforts have been communicated increasingly through annual impact reports, engagement summaries, and outreach dashboards to demonstrate their relevance, accountability, and public value. This paper presents a reflective, curiosity-driven, document-based analysis of publicly available engagement and impact reports from several universities, extension systems, and related organizations involved in agri-food and community development. It explores how these reporting practices influence what is regarded as meaningful engagement. The paper introduces the concept of "audited engagement" to describe a situation where engagement is recognized and valued mainly through quantifiable indicators such as participation, reach, and activity. These indicators serve important institutional purposes: they make engagement visible to funders and stakeholders, justify ongoing investment, and shield engagement from marginalization. However, they often emphasize process over transformation. While reports document efforts such as events held, partnerships formed, and people reached, they tend to fall short of capturing structural changes, long-term redistribution, or shifts in authority, which are central to justice-oriented agri-food systems work. Instead of assessing specific programs or suggesting new metrics, the paper

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offers a conceptual analysis of how engagement is increasingly managed through reporting. This clarifies how evaluation practices shape what engagement can reasonably achieve and what remains hard to articulate.

Keywords
community engagement, agri-food systems, higher education, evaluation and metrics, institutional legitimacy

Introduction

Community engagement is foundational to work in agriculture, food systems, and community development. Land-grant universities, extension systems, and related organizations are expected not only to generate knowledge but also to work alongside communities to address complex, place-based challenges. In recent years, however, these commitments have increasingly been demonstrated through annual impact reports, engagement summaries, and outreach dashboards designed to show relevance, accountability, and public value. These documents are now a central means by which institutions communicate what engagement is and what it accomplishes (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2023; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2020). This paper examines a set of publicly available engagement and impact reports from universities, extension systems, and related organizations working in agri-food and community-development contexts, asking a simple but consequential question: what happens when community engagement is primarily understood in terms of what can be counted and reported?

I treat these institutional reports seriously—not simply as public relations artifacts to be dismissed or as transparent windows onto institutional practice, but as governance texts that actively shape how "community," "engagement," and "impact" are understood in contemporary higher education. I analyze how engagement is counted, narrated, and materially represented in these documents, and what these practices imply about responsibility, authority, and impact. These questions arise not from skepticism about engagement but from a long-standing commitment to it in agri-food and community-development work, based on my more than 25 years of experience at land-grant universities in the U.S. whose histories and missions are inseparable from promises to serve publics beyond campus boundaries. Like many scholars and practitioners in agriculture, food systems, and community development, I am deeply invested in engaged scholarship, reciprocal partnerships, and efforts to bridge the so-called town–gown divide. I have participated in, benefited from, and advocated for engagement initiatives across teaching, research, and extension. The concern motivating this paper is therefore not whether engagement matters—it does—but how it is increasingly evaluated, narrated, and stabilized through institutional reporting practices.

Annual impact reports have come to play a central role in how these institutions demonstrate their engagement to external audiences—particularly in agriculture, food systems, and rural development contexts—including funders, legislators, community partners, accreditation bodies, and the public (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2023; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2020). These documents typically emphasize reach and activity, combining quantitative indicators with brief narratives or testimonials that highlight positive experiences and outcomes. As this paper argues, however, the growing reliance on such reports does more than document engagement: it reshapes it. When engagement is rendered legible primarily through what can be counted, aggregated, and reported annually, some dimensions of community work are foregrounded while others recede. This reflects the logics of contemporary evaluation regimes, which privilege regularity and defensibility over complexity, conflict, and long-term transformation (Shore & Wright, 2015).

To capture this dynamic, I introduce the concept of "audited engagement," a term used here to describe how reporting and evaluation practices shape how community engagement is recognized and valued, primarily through countable indicators such as participation, reach, and activity. Audited engagement is neither opposed to care nor a synonym for performative engagement. Instead, it identifies a condition in which engagement is valued

most when it can be demonstrated through metrics aligned with audit practices: counts of workshops held, partners engaged, visitors welcomed, students reached, and programs delivered. These measures do important institutional and legitimizing work. They allow institutions to demonstrate responsiveness, justify investment, and protect engagement from being dismissed as marginal or anecdotal. At the same time, they shape what counts as impact in ways that have significant implications for justice-oriented work in agri-food and community development contexts.

A central claim of this paper is that impact reporting tends to privilege process (visible activities and outputs) over transformation, understood here as changes to underlying social, institutional, or material conditions. Annual reports excel at documenting what institutions do: how often they engage, how many people they reach, and how widely their activities extend. They are far less equipped to account for the structural changes that engagement produces, including shifts in decision-making authority, resource redistribution, durable institutional obligations, and redress for historical and ongoing harms. These forms of change are often slow, uneven, and contested. They resist attribution to a single program or year. As a result, they sit uneasily within reporting frameworks designed to demonstrate annual success.

Importantly, this paper does not argue that material support is absent from engagement work. On the contrary, impact reports routinely document scholarships, free programs, donated goods, subsidized services, and other tangible benefits that flow to communities. However, these forms of support are typically framed as programmatic and discretionary—evidence of generosity, innovation, or responsiveness—rather than as structural commitments or obligations. They are presented as examples of institutional character rather than as components of redistribution, repair, or accountability. This framing also resonates with work on organizational legitimation, where institutions seek to demonstrate appropriateness and value to external stakeholders through visible, standardized practices (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Von Billerbeck, 2023). From this perspective, the reporting of engagement activities does not merely document institutional action; it also helps secure and maintain legitimacy by aligning institutional behavior with widely recognized indicators of responsibility and responsiveness.

Impact reports are not misleading. The activities they describe and the benefits they highlight are real. Yet documenting engagement can still serve as a substitute for deeper accountability. When participation, responsiveness, and material support are rendered visible primarily through reporting, they can stand in for more difficult questions about authority, obligation, and structural change (Newfield, 2016; Urbanek, 2022). Because the conditions under which engagement would count as transformative, such as power transfer or durable institutional commitments, are rarely specified in these reports, those questions are never formally addressed. Institutions can therefore truthfully present themselves as engaged and impactful while leaving questions of who decides, who pays, and who bears risk largely untouched.

The argument presented here is intentionally modest in scope and exploratory in nature. It does not seek to evaluate the quality of specific engagement initiatives or to rank institutions by their level of commitment. Instead, it offers a conceptual analysis of a pervasive institutional logic—one that cuts across land-grant and non–land-grant universities, extension systems, and community engagement units. The documents examined consist of publicly available engagement and impact reports produced by a sample of universities, extension systems, and affiliated agri-food organizations with diverse missions, geographies, and organizational structures. While most documents originate from land-grant and public university systems, the corpus also includes materials from closely aligned organizations operating within the same institutional and funding ecosystems. Sampling was neither random nor systematic, but a curiosity-driven effort to understand how engagement is rendered legible across higher education. This approach reflects the exploratory nature of the inquiry: the goal is to identify patterns in how impact is framed, not to claim representativeness or exhaustiveness.

By focusing on impact reporting as a site where engagement is translated into evidence, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations in agri-

culture, food systems, and community development about accountability, evaluation, and justice (e.g., Gupta et al., 2018; Schiff et al., 2022). It suggests that the challenge for engaged institutions is not only to increase engagement but also to reflect critically on how engagement is measured, and on the consequences of those measurements. If engagement is increasingly central to the moral and political claims universities make about themselves, then the practices used to count and communicate that engagement deserve careful scrutiny.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section situates the argument within scholarship on community engagement and institutional evaluation in agri-food and land-grant contexts. I then describe the materials and analytic approach used to examine a set of annual impact reports. The core sections analyze how material support is framed in audited engagement, why process-oriented metrics dominate, and how impact reporting functions as a nonperformative form of accountability. The discussion reflects on the implications of audited engagement for justice-oriented engagement and suggests directions for rethinking what "impact" might mean beyond what is easily counted.

Community Engagement and Evaluation: A Brief Review

Community engagement occupies a central place in food systems research, land-grant traditions, and community-development scholarship (Ohmer et al., 2022; Smith & Ohlinger, 2025; Taffere et al., 2024). Across these literatures, engagement is typically framed as both a moral commitment and a practical orientation. It entails a commitment to reciprocity, responsiveness, and relevance, as well as an orientation toward knowledge production and action that emerges through dialogue with communities rather than being imposed upon them. In agriculture, food systems, and extension contexts, engagement has long been understood as a defining feature of institutional purpose rather than a supplemental activity (Reed & Swanson, 2022). Universities are expected not only to generate knowledge but to do so in ways that are accessible, applicable, and attentive to the needs and priorities of community stakeholders (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018).

Within this tradition, community engagement has been associated with a range of normative aspirations. These include strengthening relationships between universities and communities, ensuring that research and teaching address real-world challenges, enhancing trust and legitimacy, and fostering mutual learning (Ohmer et al., 2022). In agri-food systems work, engagement is often linked to sustainability, resilience, food system transformation, and community health and well-being—issues understood to require collaboration across institutional and community boundaries (Habiyaremye, 2023). Engaged approaches are often contrasted with extractive or top-down models of expertise and are valued for their greater relevance, inclusion, and responsiveness (Becerra-Encinales et al., 2024; Dangi & Yadav, 2025).

At the same time, engagement has increasingly become an object of formal evaluation. Over the past two decades, institutions of higher education have been asked by funders, accreditors, legislators, and the public to demonstrate not only that they are engaged but also that this engagement produces measurable impact. This demand has spurred the development of a growing infrastructure of assessment tools, metrics, reporting templates, and annual summaries to document engagement activities and outcomes (e.g., Hurd, 2022; Wanjiru & Xiaoguang, 2021). In land-grant and extension systems, reporting has long been a core administrative function, but its scope and visibility have expanded markedly as engagement has become central to institutional branding and accountability (APLU, 2023).

Scholarship on evaluating community engagement has generally approached this development pragmatically. Much of the literature focuses on improving measurement, identifying best practices, and refining indicators that capture the scope and effectiveness of engagement work (e.g., Hurd, 2022; Wanjiru & Xiaoguang, 2021). Common concerns include how to document partnership quality, assess learning outcomes, demonstrate community benefit, and balance quantitative and qualitative evidence. This work reflects a sincere effort to make engagement visible and valued within institutions that often privilege research outputs, which

are more readily captured by traditional academic metrics.

However, evaluation is never neutral (House & Howe, 1999). Decisions about what to measure, how often to measure it, and how to report results shape what engagement means in practice. Evaluation frameworks do not merely reflect engagement activities; they actively structure them by signaling what counts as success, what is worth investing in, and what kinds of claims can be credibly made. In this sense, evaluation functions as a form of governance, one that aligns engagement with institutional imperatives of accountability, comparability, and defensibility (Hanberger, 2012; Power, 1997).

Annual impact reports are a particularly influential expression of this evaluative logic. Produced on a regular cycle and designed for broad audiences, these reports typically aggregate engagement activities into standardized categories: participant numbers, events, partnerships, programs, volunteers, and dollars leveraged. They often pair these indicators with brief narratives or testimonials that humanize the data and illustrate positive outcomes. The resulting documents are often praised as readable, persuasive, and effective at communicating activity and reach while demonstrating transparency and accountability (Kaufer & Steponaitis, 2021).

Yet the very features that make annual reports useful also limit what they can capture. Because they are annualized, impact reports privilege forms of engagement that can be demonstrated within short time horizons. Because they are aggregated, they favor indicators that can be standardized across programs and units. Because they are public-facing, they tend to emphasize consensus, success, and positivity rather than conflict, ambiguity, or uneven outcomes. These constraints are not imposed maliciously; they reflect the institutional contexts in which reporting occurs. Nonetheless, they shape how engagement is understood and valued.

In agri-food and community-development contexts, where many challenges are structural, historically rooted, and slow to change (Kuhmonen, 2018; Nelson & Stroink, 2014), this evaluative orientation has significant implications. Engagement activities that build relationships, host events, disseminate information, or provide services are readily documented and celebrated. By contrast, changes that involve shifts in authority, long-term resource redistribution, or durable institutional obligations that unsettle traditional hierarchies are harder to make visible within annual reporting frameworks. As a result, evaluation tends to foreground process (what institutions do and how often) rather than transformation—what changes and for whom.

Normative Commitments and Evaluation Silences

A striking feature of contemporary impact reporting is not only what is named and measured but also what isn't: absences. Across many engagement reports in higher education, explicit references to power, authority, or justice are minimal, if not entirely absent. These omissions should not be read as denial or indifference. Instead, they reflect how engagement is positioned within institutional evaluation regimes that prioritize demonstrating activity and responsiveness over adjudicating normative claims.

Engagement scholarship often entails implicit normative commitments to equity, inclusion, and fairness. These commitments are evident in calls for reciprocity, respect for community knowledge, and attention to historically marginalized groups (APLU, 2023; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2020). However, when engagement is translated into evaluative practice, particularly through annual impact reporting, these normative orientations are rarely articulated in ways that would require institutions to assess power relations, acknowledge harm, or specify obligations. Instead, these reports are often framed by indicators of participation, access, and reach, which can signal inclusivity without requiring confrontation over authority or redistribution.

This silence is analytically important. It suggests that impact reporting operates in a framework in which legitimacy does not depend on naming or resolving questions of power. Institutions can demonstrate engagement by showing they are active, present, and responsive, without specifying how decisions are made, whose priorities prevail, or how resources are allocated over time. In this

way, evaluation practices do not displace justice claims so much as render them unnecessary for institutional success.

Thus, while these reports demonstrate a level of care (e.g., events hosted, programs offered, partnerships formed, households fed) they remain largely silent on questions that would invite contestation. They routinely document redistribution through material transfers, such as scholarships, donated goods and services, and subsidized training and expertise. Yet these examples of redistribution are largely apolitical. Access to education, donated food, and technical assistance to farmers are uncontroversial because they are not efforts to provide compensation for structural harm or to change systems in ways that might introduce uncomfortable trade-offs. This silence is not a reporting failure; it is a feature of evaluation systems designed to produce coherence, comparability, and positive narratives within constrained institutional environments.

Recognizing these silences does not require rejecting engagement or its normative aspirations. Rather, it calls for closer attention to how evaluation practices shape understandings of engagement, a timely focus given that engagement is increasingly central to the identity and legitimacy of many institutions, especially those reliant on public funding. The following sections allow me to reflect more concretely on these tensions by analyzing a sample of reports from engagement-forward institutions across North America.

Empirically Anchoring My Reflections: Materials and Analytic Approach

As a reflective essay, this "analysis" is intentionally exploratory and therefore partial. The materials examined include publicly available documents produced by universities, extension systems, and affiliated agri-food organizations, including higher education consortia and community-development entities operating in these institutional ecosystems. Reflecting its curiosity-driven nature, the sample draws from institutions I have long respected for their agri-food-based community-engagement work. The focus is on annual impact reports, documents that many readers will recognize not only as sources of information but also as familiar institutional genres. I approach these materials not as neutral accounts of engagement activity, nor as comprehensive representations of what institutions "really do," but as texts that actively shape how engagement is understood, valued, communicated, and justified.

My interest in these documents is both scholarly and personal. Over the past quarter-century, I have worked at land-grant universities in roles that placed community engagement at the center of the institutional mission. At various points, I have also helped produce the very kinds of reports examined here: gathering metrics, crafting narratives, and translating complex, relational work into forms legible to administrators, funders, and public audiences. This experience informs the paper's analytic stance. The goal is not to expose shortcomings or misrepresentations but to reflect on how engagement is structured by the practical demands of reporting and evaluation.

Document-Based Analysis

The documents analyzed were selected through a convenience-based, curiosity-driven process rather than through random or systematic sampling. As someone embedded in engagement-oriented academic spaces, I encounter these reports regularly as part of institutional communications, professional networks, and routine administrative life. The sample reflects an effort to examine broadly how similar reporting logics appear across settings, rather than to identify best or worst practices.

The analysis draws on a small set of publicly available impact and engagement reports from universities, extension systems, and affiliated agri-food organizations, including consortia and centers with diverse missions, geographies, and organizational histories. Rather than treating these documents as cases for comparison or evaluation, I treat them as instances of a shared reporting genre that renders community engagement legible and accountable. Table 1 lists the documents included in the analysis along with their institutional context and stated purpose. The table is intended to provide transparency about the materials examined, not to imply representativeness or exhaustiveness.

Table 1. Impact and Engagement Reports Included in the Analysis [a]

Institution or Consortium	Report Title (Year)	Institutional Type	Primary Focus of Report	Public URL
Colorado State University (CSU Spur)	*CSU Spur Impact Report* (2025)	Land-grant university initiative	Community engagement, education, innovation, agri-food, sustainability	https://csuspur.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2025/08/2025-CSU-Spur-Impact-Report-FINAL-ACS.pdf
Iowa State University Extension and Outreach	*Impact Report* (2024)	Land-grant extension system	Extension programming, agri-food systems, community outcomes	https://www.extension.iastate.edu/impact-stories/2024-impact-report
West Virginia University	*Community Engagement Impact Report* (2023)	Land-grant university	Community partnerships, outreach, institutional engagement	https://communityengagement.wvu.edu/about/impact-report
Utah State University	*Community Engagement Annual Report* (2025)	Land-grant university	Community engagement across teaching, research, and extension	https://www.usu.edu/community-engagement/files/2025_CCE-Annual-Report.pdf
University of British Columbia	*Community Engagement Annual Report* (2024)	Public research university (non–land-grant)	Community engagement, partnerships, institutional impact	https://communityengagement.ubc.ca/news/2024-annual-report
North Central Regional Center for Rural Development	*Impact Report* (2024)	Multi-institution land-grant consortium	Rural development, extension, research coordination	https://ncrcrd.ag.purdue.edu/community-development/impact-reports/
Association of 1890 Research Directors	*1890 Land-Grant Universities Impact Report* (2024)	Historically Black land-grant consortium	Extension, research, education, community impact	https://1890aea.org/application/files/7317/2186/6767/2024_1890_Land-grant_Universities_Impact_Report-FINAL-web.pdf

[a] Documents were selected as a convenience sample based on professional familiarity, public availability, and relevance to institutional community engagement and impact reporting. The table is intended to provide transparency about the materials analyzed rather than to suggest representativeness or exhaustiveness.

Analytic Focus

The analysis is qualitative and interpretive, grounded in close, iterative reading of the documents (Fairclough, 2023). My focus is not on verifying the accuracy of reported figures or assessing program effectiveness, but on understanding how engagement is framed by specific evaluative choices. Four analytic questions guided the reading:

- What is counted? Across reports, specific indicators are ubiquitous: for example, the number of participants, events, partnerships, students reached, volunteers engaged, and dollars leveraged. Attention is given to how these indicators are aggregated, highlighted, and presented as evidence of impact.
- How is engagement narrated? This includes the language used to describe relationships with communities, the use of testimonials and success stories, and the affective tone of reporting. Engagement is often framed as responsive, collaborative, and innovative, and these narratives are closely tied to the metrics provided.
- How is material support framed? Many reports document tangible benefits: free programs, scholarships, donated goods, and subsidized services. Rather than evaluating the adequacy of these supports, the analysis focuses on their positioning: for example, as programmatic offerings, discretionary benefits, or efforts to disrupt the status quo and address systemic injustices.
- How are concepts such as responsibility, authority, and inequity positioned, either implicitly or explicitly? This involves noting both what is said and what remains largely unspoken. In particular, the analysis attends to the relative absence of explicit language about power, obligation, or justice, and considers how this silence shapes what engagement can plausibly be understood to accomplish within institutional accounts.

My focus was on pattern recognition—what is repeatedly said and what is repeatedly not said—rather than institutional critique. Individual reports are neither compared nor ranked, and institutions are not evaluated against one another. Instead, the analysis highlights a shared evaluative logic that cuts across institutional contexts, making "engagement" legible through audit-friendly indicators of activity, participation, and reach.

Audited Engagement in Practice

This section examines how community engagement is translated into institutional "impact" through formal reporting practices. Rather than treating impact reports as neutral summaries of activity or aspirational statements of institutional values, I treat them as practical instruments that make engagement visible, accountable, and meaningful within institutions (Kooli, 2019; Shore & Wright, 2015). Across the documents analyzed, a consistent pattern emerges: engagement becomes legible when it can be counted, narrated, and aggregated in ways that align with audit-oriented evaluation systems. This pattern does not reflect indifference to communities or a lack of institutional care. Instead, it reflects the conditions under which universities and other organizations are increasingly asked to demonstrate responsibility.

To orient the analysis, Table 2 summarizes the recurring indicator categories used across the reports examined. The table is not intended as a comprehensive inventory or a frequency-based content analysis. Rather, it serves as an analytic aid and an empirical anchor, highlighting shared evaluative patterns across institutions and reporting contexts. These patterns provide the backdrop for the discussion that follows, which traces how engagement is understood as impact through what is counted, how material support is framed, and what remains outside the evaluative frame. By making these patterns explicit at the outset, the table allows the analysis to move beyond individual documents and toward the broader evaluative logic that organizes contemporary engagement reporting. The subsections that follow, therefore, focus on how these patterns operate and what they enable, rather than on attributing specific claims to particular institutions or tallying their frequency across documents.

Table 2. Common Indicators Found Among the Reports Analyzed [a]

Indicator Category	Examples of Metrics	Analytic Implication
Participation & Reach	Number of visitors, event attendees, students served, workshop participants	Privileges scale and visibility of engagement over depth or redistribution
Partnerships & Collaboration	Number of partners, MOUs, cross-sector collaborations	Frames engagement as relational density rather than shared authority
Programs & Activities	Events hosted, courses offered, pilot projects launched	Emphasizes activity and productivity within annual reporting cycles
Material Support	Scholarships, free programs, donated goods, subsidized services	Presents support as discretionary generosity rather than obligation
Economic & Media Impact	Dollars leveraged, economic impact estimates, media views or "clicks"	Aligns engagement with institutional value and reputational return
Satisfaction & Affect	Survey ratings, testimonials, qualitative feedback	Uses positive affect as evidence of success (as having "impact") and legitimacy

[a] This table summarizes recurring indicator types observed across the analyzed documents. It is intended to illustrate common evaluative patterns rather than provide a comprehensive inventory or frequency-based content analysis.

What Gets Counted

Across institutions and report types, impact is most often shown through indicators of participation, reach, and activity. These indicators include the number of visitors, event attendees, students served, workshop participants, partners engaged, programs delivered, and media impressions generated. These measures recur across reports, regardless of institutional mission or geographic context, providing a shared vocabulary for communicating engagement to administrators, funders, legislators, and the public.

These indicators perform important institutional work (Erkkilä et al., 2016). They make engagement visible in organizations that rely on demonstrable outputs to allocate resources and assess performance. They enable engagement units to justify their existence in increasingly competitive, metric-driven environments. They also signal responsiveness to communities by showing that institutions are present, active, and involved. Counting engagement, in this sense, is not incidental but essential to sustaining engagement in contemporary higher education and beyond.

At the same time, privileging quantifiable indicators shapes what engagement can plausibly be said to accomplish. Participation metrics foreground frequency over transformation. A well-attended event is treated as impactful regardless of whether it does anything else, thereby backgrounding questions about whether those events altered long-term relationships, redistributed authority, or changed material conditions. Similarly, the accumulation of partnerships can be celebrated as evidence of connectivity without examining how responsibility or decision-making power is distributed within those relationships.

These metrics do not misrepresent engagement, as they reflect real activities, interactions, and investments. But they also compress complex, relational work into standardized forms compatible with annual reporting cycles. What is gained is comparability, visibility, and administrative clarity. What is lost is attention to uneven outcomes, slow change, and forms of impact that resist aggregation.

Material Support That Does Not Rock the Boat

In addition to documenting participation and reach, impact reports routinely highlight the forms of material support provided through engagement activities. These supports commonly include free or subsidized programs and events, scholarships and fee waivers, donated goods or services, and reduced-cost access to facilities, expertise, or care. Their inclusion signals that engagement is not merely symbolic or relational but materially consequential.

These forms of support matter. They can lower barriers to participation, provide immediate resources, and address pressing needs. Their visibility in impact reports reflects an institutional desire to show that engagement yields tangible benefits rather than abstract goodwill. The question, then, is not whether these supports make a difference, but what kind of difference they are positioned to represent in institutional accounts of impact.

This framing has significant consequences. By treating material support as evidence of institutional character rather than institutional responsibility, impact reports remove these transfers from broader questions of accountability and structural change. Support is something institutions provide when conditions allow, not something they are required to sustain in the face of systemic injustices.

The absence of obligation language does not imply indifference to inequality or need. Rather, it reflects how engagement is situated within evaluative frameworks that reward demonstrable activity while avoiding controversial claims that would require adjudicating responsibility or harm. Material support becomes visible without becoming political. Resources move, benefits accrue, and impacts are documented, yet the underlying relations that structure access to resources remain unexamined.

This dynamic can be described as material redistribution without structural transformation. Material transfers occur, but they are framed to avoid naming justice-oriented redistribution claims. Engagement provides assistance without acknowledging extraction, repair, or redress. As a result, support is folded into narratives of responsiveness rather than into claims about justice or obligation.

Declaring Impact, Avoiding Accountability

Taken together, participation metrics and programmatic support enable institutions to make credible claims about impact. Reports can truthfully state that thousands of people were engaged, partnerships were formed, and resources were provided. These claims are not exaggerated. Yet they also function in ways that substitute documentation for accountability.

Impact reports rarely articulate the conditions under which engagement counts as transformative rather than active. Concepts such as power, authority, or justice are largely absent in these reports—not because they are rejected, but because they are unnecessary within the evaluative frame. Engagement succeeds when it can be demonstrated through auditable indicators, not by making contested claims or controversial investments.

This does not mean engagement lacks sincerity or value. On the contrary, the effectiveness of impact reporting lies in its ability to translate care into forms legible to institutional systems. By aligning engagement with audit-friendly indicators, such as those summarized in Table 2, reports strengthen legitimacy and protect engagement work from marginalization. They allow institutions to present themselves as responsive, relevant, and publicly accountable.

At the same time, this alignment limits the scope of what engagement can be expected to achieve. When impact is defined primarily by visibility, participation, and activity, engagement becomes governable in ways that favor continuity and stability over disruption and change. Responsiveness is evident, but responsibility remains diffuse. Audited engagement is therefore not indicative of failure but rather an institutional response to the demand to demonstrate impact under conditions of accountability, constraint, and risk.

Discussion: Why "Audited Engagement" Matters

The analysis presented here identifies the concept "audited engagement" as a dominant evaluative logic that shapes how engagement is understood and justified in higher education and beyond. This logic does not displace engagement or undermine its importance. Rather, it reorganizes it around forms of evidence compatible with institutional accountability systems. The significance of audited engagement lies not in contradiction (engagement versus evaluation) but in coexistence: engagement expands even as its meaning is increasingly structured by what can be counted, reported, and defended.

The concept of audited engagement helps explain a central tension in contemporary agri-food systems, land-grant missions, and rural develop-

ment efforts: the simultaneous proliferation of engagement and the persistence, and, in many cases, expansion, of structural inequities (Ostrom, 2022). Universities, extension systems, and community-facing centers are arguably more engaged than ever, as others have noted, especially as "engagement" has come to be distinguished from earlier extension models and adjacent concepts such as "diffusion," marking a shift away from linear knowledge transfer toward more relational, participatory, and place-based forms of institutional involvement (Becerra-Encinales, 2024; Carolan, 2024).

Advances in digital and hybrid infrastructures have lowered the logistical costs of convening, enabling institutions to host more events, reach broader audiences, and sustain relationships across distances (Klerkx, 2021). At the same time, the current political moment has intensified institutional focus on community engagement, particularly in rural spaces, where narratives of neglect, grievance, and disconnection have become increasingly salient (Carolan, 2020). In response, institutions have invested heavily in visible outreach—new partnerships, listening sessions, pilot programs, and place-based initiatives—designed to demonstrate presence, responsiveness, and relevance.

This expansion of engagement activity is real and consequential. More people are reached, more resources are mobilized, and more institutional energy is directed toward communities long described as underserved or overlooked. Yet this proliferation of engagement has not produced commensurate shifts in the structural conditions it is often tasked with addressing. Precarious rural and urban livelihoods, uneven access to education and healthcare, environmental exposure, and persistent inequities in the food system remain deeply entrenched, even as engagement infrastructures grow denser (Heaberlin & Shattuck, 2023; Stiernström, 2023). In some cases, these conditions have intensified alongside heightened engagement, as institutions are asked to perform more relational work.

Such work is essential, but so too are efforts to change structural conditions, which would require multiscale efforts and may entail controversial trade-offs for those who have enjoyed a certain level of positional privilege. Admittedly, this type of opportunity involves risks, as these institutions often operate at the intersection of public funding, political scrutiny, and community expectations. In such settings, the ability to demonstrate care without provoking conflict can be institutionally advantageous. Audited engagement emerges here not as a retreat from responsibility, but as a pragmatic way of managing risk—one that allows institutions to expand engagement, document responsiveness, and maintain legitimacy, while leaving more contentious questions of redistribution and authority largely unresolved.

For land-grant universities, audited engagement also reframes longstanding extension and outreach traditions. This shift does not negate the public mission of land-grant institutions, but it does alter how that mission is made legible and defensible through contemporary reporting and evaluation systems. Engagement becomes something institutions must continually demonstrate rather than something they are assumed to embody. While documenting commitment and impact annually can serve important purposes—such as protecting engagement work, securing resources, and signaling public value—it also reshapes institutional attention. Reporting practices tend to crowd out forms of engagement that are slower, less visible, or more politically contentious, and they privilege activities that can be readily narrated, counted, and aggregated.

Rethinking Impact: A Thought Exercise—No Prescriptions

Rather than offering a new set of metrics or advocating alternative reporting systems, this paper raises questions about what current definitions of impact enable and what they foreclose. When impact is defined primarily by participation, reach, and activity, what kinds of change become difficult to name? What forms of engagement resist annualization, aggregation, or attribution? And what happens to community and stakeholder needs that depend on longer temporal horizons or contested interpretations?

I ask these questions not to dismiss the value of existing evaluation practices but to situate them within the process of reporting and evaluating

"impact." Impact reporting responds to real institutional pressures and serves important protective functions for engagement work. At the same time, it shapes expectations about what engagement should entail and how success should be measured. Rethinking impact, in this sense, is less about replacing one metric with another than about recognizing the limits of metricized care.

Importantly, this is not an argument for abandoning measurement. It is an argument for attending to the consequences of measurement, particularly when measurement becomes the primary site where engagement is recognized as legitimate. Asking what impact means and who defines it is itself an act of engagement.

Limits and Openings

This paper neither offers a blueprint for more just evaluation systems nor proposes alternative indicators that could easily replace those currently in use. Doing so would risk reproducing the very dynamics under examination: substituting one set of audit-friendly measures for another.

Instead, the contribution lies in naming a condition. Audited engagement describes how engagement becomes governable through evaluation practices that privilege demonstration—visible activities and outputs—over transformation, understood as changes to underlying social and institutional conditions. Recognizing this condition creates space for reflection rather than immediate reform. It invites practitioners, administrators, and scholars to ask when engagement is being asked to do too much symbolic work and when evaluation practices might be absorbing demands that counting alone cannot resolve.

The observations presented here are intentionally reflective and document-based, but they also point toward the value of more systematic approaches to studying how engagement is rendered visible and accountable. One avenue would involve constructing a larger, comparative collection of engagement and impact reports across institutions and over time, enabling more formal coding of reporting practices, indicators, and narrative structures. Such an approach could examine how different institutional types, funding environments, and policy contexts shape what is counted and how it is presented. It would also be important to attend to variation across state and local political contexts, including differences in public investment in higher education, shifting expectations around accountability, and the degree of institutional vulnerability to external scrutiny. These dynamics may influence not only how engagement is reported, but how it is strategically framed in relation to perceived political audiences. A complementary strategy would involve triangulating document analysis with interviews and ethnographic engagement, tracing how reporting practices are produced, interpreted, and operationalized within institutions and among community partners. Together, these approaches would allow researchers to assess not only the prevalence of audited engagement practices, but also how they are shaped by, and respond to, broader political and institutional environments, with consequences for how engagement is organized, valued, and experienced in practice.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how community engagement is increasingly rendered visible and legitimate through institutional impact reporting, and how that process reshapes what engagement can plausibly mean in higher education and other engagement-centered institutions and networks. In naming the concept of audited engagement, I draw on my experience working within engagement-oriented institutions to describe a condition familiar to many in this space: engagement tends to be valued most when it can be counted, narrated, and aggregated in ways that align with audit-oriented evaluation systems.

The ways engagement is counted shape how it is understood, what kinds of claims it can support, and which forms of change remain difficult to name. For scholars and practitioners working in agriculture, food systems, and community development, this insight is especially salient. Engagement is foundational to these fields, yet the ways it is evaluated can quietly narrow its ambitions. Recognizing audited engagement as a dominant evaluative logic allows for a more honest conversation about what engagement can and cannot accomplish under current institutional conditions.

Engagement will remain a priority across pub-

lic-facing, publicly accountable institutions. At the same time, the practices used to measure and demonstrate engagement will proliferate, particularly with the growing reliance on social media and other digital outreach channels. Paying attention to how these practices organize foregrounded and backgrounded elements is therefore not peripheral to the work of engagement. It ought to be central to what we do.



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