

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

ROYSTER GLOBAL WHITE PAPER #2

AUTHORS:

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

- Bethan Cornell, Department of Physics, College of Natural & Mathematical Sciences
- Alexandra Lautarescu, Department of Forensic & Neurodevelopmental Sciences, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience
- Rakhee Patel, Department of Population and Patient Health, Dental Institute
- Alfio Puglisi, Department of European & International Studies, College of Social Science & Public Policy

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

- Carlee S. Forbes, Department of Art & Art History, College of Arts & Sciences
- Corinna Keeler, Department of Geography, College of Arts & Sciences
- Ben Lee, Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, School of Medicine
- Maximilian Spiegel, Department of Communication, College of Arts & Sciences

Introduction

Royster Global is an initiative connecting graduate students from King's College London (KCL) and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). With the goal of fostering interdisciplinary research and collaborative connections, the initiative grows out of a long-standing partnership between KCL and UNC. Royster Global takes its name from the Royster Society of Fellows at UNC. Started in 1996, the Royster Society of Fellows provides a group of select graduate students from across UNC with institutional support and competitive funding packages to encourage interdisciplinary and innovative research. Royster Fellows have taken on many initiatives, from co-teaching interdisciplinary seminars for college freshmen, leading the "Stigma Free Carolina" campaign aimed at reducing stigma toward mental health concerns and treatment, to sharing their research in interdisciplinary forums. Royster Global seeks to expand the Royster experience beyond the campus at UNC and to foster an even larger interdisciplinary and collaborative research community of graduate students.

While the Royster Fellows were already a defined group at UNC, the Royster Global initiative necessitated the formation of a new cohort at KCL. Once participants at KCL were selected via a competitive application process, detailed planning began in earnest. Both students and mentors decided that the graduate students themselves should be in charge of envisioning the goals and aims for the first meeting. The theme of the first conference, which took place in Chapel Hill in July 2017, was "Making Knowledge: Graduate Education in a Global Context." With input coming from students on both sides of the Atlantic, the conference itself became a good example of the kind of international collaboration that we hoped to foster among graduate students. A resulting white paper can be found at: <http://roysterglobal.web.unc.edu/files/2018/02/Royster-Global-White-Paper.pdf>.

In both 2017 and 2018, students did not want a conventional conference with research papers and panels, and instead chose to organize the conference as a variety of sessions organized around a central theme. Following the success of the 2017 conference in Chapel Hill, Fellows looked forward to continuing the dialogues about interdisciplinary and graduate education in the 2018 conference at KCL. The 2018 conference pivoted around the idea of "Civil Society and the Role of the University." By fostering conversations between Royster Global's interdisciplinary Fellows, university administrators from both UNC and KCL, and community leaders, this conference provided a space to discuss diverse perspectives on the relationships between universities, the communities they serve, and the communities in which they are located. Conference sessions were planned collaboratively by conference participants from UNC and KCL, with most conference sessions being organized by at least one representative from each institution, working collaboratively.

Three themes emerged throughout the conference. First, the central organizing principle of this year's conference, community engagement, provided a lens for Fellows to explore questions related to the relationship between the University and various community partners. Fellows both

witnessed current initiatives and imagined new possibilities for civic engagement in both the US and the UK. Second, the changing role of technology and data arose as a theme in multiple conference sessions and was identified as an important site for instilling ethics of civic-minded approaches to research and teaching. Finally, a third theme of this year's conference was a critical reflection on the nature of the Royster Global conference itself—how can Fellows create a conference structure that encourages civic engagement and interdisciplinarity? In this paper, we will discuss how each of these three themes were articulated during the 2018 Royster Global Conference, not only through discrete conference sessions but also ongoing conversations that spanned our three days together.

Theme 1: Civic Engagement

The conference included not only discussion sessions which imagined possibilities for civic engagement between Fellows and university stakeholders in theoretical terms, but also sessions that connected Fellows with community partners to imagine future collaborations that put the civic mission of both KCL and UNC into practice. The theme of civic engagement emerged from these sessions as a way to describe the myriad ways that universities interact with the communities, both local and global, in which they are situated. Throughout the conference, Fellows discussed the mutually constitutive relationship between universities and the broader community. Through workshops and discussions, we contemplated whether there is an imperative for universities to be civically minded in actively working for the benefit of surrounding neighborhoods and areas which may not have a formal relationship with the university but are nevertheless affected by its presence, and what our role as graduate students could look like in doing that civic work. The reflections below describe three conference sessions that directly invoked this theme of civic engagement.

Visit to the Black Cultural Archives

The Royster Global Fellows traveled to the Brixton district of London to visit the Black Cultural Archives (BCA), located in Windrush Square. The visit began with an exploration of the space, including the nearby African and Caribbean War Memorial on Windrush Square. This memorial was constructed only fairly recently; its history expresses struggles around inclusion in and exclusion from dominant histories. The group was then guided through the exhibition on display at the time at BCA: *Family Ties—The Adamah Papers*. This exhibition focused on the British-Ghanian Adamah family's history and connections to Ewe heritage. Exhibited were a collection of family photographs and textiles. Crucially, the documents archived and exhibited by BCA underline the complexities of colonial cultural history. Colonial dominance is never all-encompassing; different practices may persist in some local contexts while being subjugated in others. Both background information on the exhibition and the following visit of the actual archive room made visible the various processes, as well as constraints and potentials, of archival work.

The event's second half consisted of a group discussion led by Professor Alana Harris of KCL's History Department, who has been teaching a course taking place at both KCL and BCA. The discussion also featured several guests, including BCA Director Paul Reid, and touched on a variety of topics. Director Reid spoke frankly about the challenges of the current political context. The discussion underlined the necessity of alternatives to exclusionary histories. It sustained a strongly political character throughout and touched, for instance, on the challenges faced by attempts to establish oft-excluded Black history in curricula beyond reductions to specific individuals and narrow themes such as slavery, as well as the challenges posed by an institution's transformation over time. UNC students connected the discussion of the Windrush generation and other exhibitions in the Archives to the debates and current events on UNC's Chapel Hill campus surrounding the "Silent Sam" monument, the legacy of the confederacy, and assertions of white supremacy. The roundtable discussion concluded with a consideration of struggles over competing histories, or understandings of history transcend the different locations. This, and the session in its entirety, underlined the importance of institutions such as BCA in the face of exclusionary histories and persistent racism.

Visit to South London Citizens

The conference session undertaken with the South London Citizens (SLC) civil society organization outlined key concepts in community organization that could pave the way for universities to engage with community stakeholders and neighbors in projects that have tangible, clearly outlined benefits to both "town" and "gown." One key discussion during this session centered on the relationship between power and community organizing. Broadly speaking, the term "power" in academic contexts can have negative connotations; however, community organizing emphasizes the relational and multilateral form of power (power with others), instead of its zero-sum game and unilateral variant (power over others). To this end, foundational ideas in community organizing were discussed: power, self-interest and leadership. All three tenets ultimately pave the way towards members of a community working together to define and establish services and initiatives that meet its own needs.

The cornerstones of community organizations are established on the premise that power provides the means with which change takes place. It is therefore critical to examine who has the power, and then evaluate how such entities use it. Community organizations such as SLC envision their role as mediators and facilitators, and to illustrate to its audience how power is operationalized in society such that we end up with the "world as it is" and not the "world as it should be." Similar arguments were made about self-interest, and to distinguish it from selfishness: SLC emphasized the need for compromises between selfishness (complete disregard for others) and selflessness (complete disregard for oneself).

Lastly, people identified as leaders must engage in people-centered programming that

prioritizes the wants and needs of the audience, and actively involves said audience in the process. Leaders may have traits deemed ideal (gregarious, diplomatic, rational to name some) for their job, but these traits are ultimately neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for a successful leader. This comparison is perhaps the most apt one to consider in our efforts to envision and work towards a civic university: an institution may have all the technical expertise, financial wherewithal and other necessary means to execute all conceivable projects. However, without the ability to mobilize everyone involved in the institution to work towards a common goal that each member finds meaningful and valuable, projects completed by this institution will never truly be “community-based.”

Collegiate/University Athletics as a Mode of Civic Engagement

Fellows organized a session on the relationship between athletics and academics at UNC and KCL, with student-athletes from both institutions participating in a panel discussion. The discussion touched on the funding mechanisms for university athletics, the connections between the university and the surrounding community fostered by athletic programs, and the importance of exercise facilities and wellness programs for those with high-stress positions such as academic researchers. There are many ways in which having a strong ethos of sport and exercise at a university may encourage it to be a civic institution. It has long been shown that there is a clear link between regular exercise, improved mood and reduced stress, and consequently university students and employees who have easy access to sports and exercise facilities are more likely to be happier at work.

The benefits of sport do not stop at the individual level: having a strong physical activity ethos leads to a clear sense of community within an institution. This encourages researchers across disciplines to interact and helps them initiate collaborations outside of their immediate teams. Furthermore, the sport gives an easy way for universities to open their doors to local communities—be that via the use of facilities, or through larger sports-based collaborative events. This cross-communication helps build stronger links, both for wide-reaching projects that impact local people and between the communities and researchers themselves, breaking down barriers and making the institution a more welcoming and accessible place for all. This is a key part of the definition of “civic.” It is also crucial to being a diverse institution in which all people from all walks of life are welcome—one cannot truly be civic unless one is truly inclusive.

Despite all the benefits that sport may bring to an institution and to civic projects, there remain immense challenges in the current academic climate. It is common that in many cases extracurricular activities are not valued as highly as research and their values are not always seen. Anecdotally, although a university may have a message of community and wellbeing, this is not always heard by individual researchers; there are weak or non-existent mechanisms for ensuring that all staff have truly equal and supported access to sports and wellbeing services. Much more regulation is needed to ensure that the academic workplace is an inclusive one, with all students and

staff feeling able and proud to pursue physical activity. This will only happen, and indeed the true benefits of sport to a civic university will only be felt, when there is a strong culture shift towards valuing the benefits of life outside academia to academia itself. This must be visible to all members of the community, especially those on temporary or research-based contracts such as post-graduate students.

Theme 2: The digital world & the changing nature of data and technology

Another theme that arose throughout the conference was the changing role of data and technology in university settings, from the classroom to research initiatives to engaging the public in efforts such as citizen science data collection. In multiple sessions throughout the conference, presenters shared new ways that data is shaping their approach to scholarship, and Fellows grappled with the role that technology may play in the future of the university.

One session that highlighted this trend was the spotlight on the air quality collaboration between KCL researchers and the London mayoral office. Fellows witnessed how KCL researchers are monitoring air quality via a variety of different air measurement technologies, and collaborating directly with local government to ensure that research regarding air quality and pollution translates to policy. The technological innovations for measuring air quality include a large network of geospatial air sensors positioned around London that take frequent pollutant readings, as well as personal air monitors worn by citizens participating in experiments regarding their exposure to pollution when traveling different means of transportation (i.e. walking, bike, bus, underground, car). The session leaders also illustrated how the mayor's air quality fund is supporting projects in various London boroughs to improve air quality and create low-emission neighborhoods. In many ways, this air quality case study presented at the conference represents the wide sphere of technology in modern life, as the researchers consider nearly ubiquitous large-scale "big data" sources as well as personal, wearable technology that monitors health at an individual level.

Given the immense amount of data generated on a regular basis by social media, government agencies, corporate interests, and other actors in the digital world, there is a need for careful consideration of the ethics, limits, and possibilities of data and technology. Especially given the current shortage of experts who can structure and analyze big data, universities can play a role in unleashing the potential of data to serve better society and ensuring moral and legal conduct in the exploration and utilization of data. However, in addition to educating future leaders in the big data realm, it is essential that universities meet the growing need for training among non-traditional students such as industry workers or government officials, who may not be familiar with recent advancements in digital technologies.

In order to explore the tensions and possibilities posed by rapidly changing technologies, Fellows took part in a Hackathon at the Gordon Museum of Pathology. One of the most

unconventional sessions of the conference, the purpose of the Hackathon was to encourage group collaboration between different research groups and tackle issues related to “transhumanism.” This allowed students to think about how the deployment of automated decision systems and interactive digital systems are creating new social interactions between humans and machines. This activity also allowed students to think about how the technology landscape is driven by artificial intelligence, internet of things, Blockchain, and predictive and behavioral analytics. Fellows discussed the significant potential of computing technologies in creating a more ethical society versus the often observed unethical or illegal decisions of technology user cases, raising concerns on the topic of data, algorithm and interaction ethics.

Theme 3: Reflection on the nature of the Royster Global Conference

The Royster Global conference’s framework fostered discussions of universities’ relationship to their social context, but also set certain limits on the exploration of this constitutive relationship and its potentials. Notably, the models of the civic university presented at the outset of the conference, such as the Triple and Quadruple Helix Models, rely on several problematic presumptions, or appear to take certain terms for granted. To conceive of “the university” as a unitary entity is to neglect disciplinary, financial, political, and other struggles shaping academic institutions. To take “the community” for granted in composition and representation is to reduce the complexities of a university’s embeddedness in its context to a binary relationship between university and community; it is also to neglect power relations (along lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) within and between communities. These power relations define communities’ “needs” (which the civic university is supposed to take into account) and their forms of “leadership” (which the civic university is supposed to engage with).

Several models call for an engagement with pre-defined societal sectors for the sake of growth, innovation, and more. Even if one ignores the “entrepreneurial” language that frames the value of academic work in terms of contemporary formations of capitalism, questions still arise. How much room do these models, oriented towards collaboration (with the public and private sectors), leave for fundamental critiques of contemporary conditions that some scholarly work may produce? Additionally, these models have a specific (political) history and are not necessarily translatable into non-British contexts. Future Royster Global events could foster a commitment to complexity and critical thought by setting aside more time for the interrogation of conference frameworks and key terms.

The Royster Global initiative enables conversation and collaboration across national and disciplinary borders. It fosters considerable creative-intellectual potentials. At the Royster Global conference 2018, this was most visible in those sessions that allowed for sustained group work. Ideally, future conferences would expand such sessions in order to deepen an understanding of

interdisciplinary work. To make more time for interdisciplinary work would also help accommodate the massive differences between disciplinary backgrounds: the stakes and terms of some disciplines or fields are more common-sensically accepted and accessible than those of others. The conference's Transhumanism and Artificial Intelligence Hackathon, discussed above, provides a salient example. Technological innovation is generally understood to be of great relevance, especially in relation to medical advancement, and sometimes inflected with a technological utopianism; but the stakes and terms of the critical interrogation of such utopianism, or even of specific technologies, in the humanities and beyond are often less publicly visible (e.g., what even is the "human" in "transhumanism"?). By setting aside further time for the establishment of such stakes and terms, these already stimulating conversations could gain in depth considerably and enable different and new modes of "innovation" and "engagement" that benefit from genuinely interdisciplinary work.

Conclusion

During the Royster Global conference in July 2018, Fellows contemplated the central theme of "Civic Society and the Role of the University" through three days of conference sessions, events, and activities at various KCL campuses around London as well as several community sites beyond the university walls. Through these sessions, Fellows explored themes of civic engagement, the changing role of data and technology, and the limits and possibilities of academic conferences in an increasingly interdisciplinary world. This white paper has summarized some of the main activities and key takeaways from the 2018 Royster Global conference, and offered future directions for university civic engagement efforts and insights for planning subsequent conferences or workshops.

As part of the Royster conference, we identified a need for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary conversations and collaborations, which can allow research teams to balance specialized skill sets and theoretical approaches and often ultimately lead to stronger research outcomes. In particular, we observed within our cohort of Fellows that graduate students are working on topics that are increasingly interdisciplinary and community-based under mentorship from advisors who are more solidly grounded in traditional scholarly disciplines. Therefore, in many situations, we can act as "bridges," not only between disciplines but also between universities and the broader community. For example, among the 2018 Fellows, there are researchers who are working on mental health and psychosocial wellness through projects that not only generate valuable research data, but also provide services within communities. In some ways, the Royster Global conference is one step toward building these bridges as it brings together researchers from multiple disciplines and universities, but further work can be done in strengthening collaborations with civil society institutions and community groups outside the university.

As we finalize this paper, we are in the process of developing the 2019 Royster Global Conference around the central theme of "borders." In reflecting on the outcomes and conversations

from the 2018 Royster Global Conference sessions, we found ourselves rethinking and reimagining borders in myriad ways related to the civic mission of the university. What purpose do borders between disciplines serve, and how does the increasingly interdisciplinary academy both rely upon and deconstruct those borders? How are borders between universities and the communities articulated, and how can research and outreach efforts work across those borders? What are the borders between humans and technology as we increasingly incorporate digital technology and data into our daily lives and our societal structures? These questions emerged from careful consideration of the role of the civic university during the 2018 Royster Global Conference, and will be taken up more holistically during the upcoming 2019 Royster Global Conference, which will convene Fellows from UNC and KCL alongside new Fellows from additional universities on three continents to continue the dynamic intellectual exchange of the Royster Global program.