

# Evaluating Publicly-Engaged Scholarship at Rutgers: FAQ\*

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Rutgers recently provided [a definition of publicly-engaged scholarship and guidelines](#) for evaluating it in the tenure and promotion process. The language in the PES Guidelines is broad, permitting a wide range of interpretations about what specific activities count as scholarship and what counts as documentary evidence of this scholarship. The flexible language gives reviewing units (such as departments and deans) wide latitude in the metrics, evidence, and arguments they use in their own narrative evaluations of candidates. However, this latitude can also feel confusing.

This document answers common questions I encountered as I talked with Rutgers colleagues at all levels of the evaluative process about how to incorporate PES in rigorous evaluations of candidates for tenure and promotion. It covers three areas: external letter-writers, non-traditional products of scholarship, and contract funding. The answers are my good faith effort to interpret Rutgers' policies in the context of the national conversation about PES in higher education.

## 1 External letter-writers

An important part of evaluating a candidate for tenure and promotion is soliciting letters from external letter writers, who are traditionally academics of higher rank than the candidate at peer or aspirational academic institutions.

### 1.1 Can the department solicit external letters from non-academics?

**Yes.** The PES Guidelines permit soliciting letters from non-traditional letter writers, such as community partners or public figures. The PES Guidelines state (emphasis mine): “Solicit letters from partners—they should be confidential from the candidate, but *clearly will not be arms length*. Consider soliciting letters from leading public figures, *whether or not they have an academic connection*. May also solicit letters from subject matter experts, such as government agencies, organizations (i.e. the American Cancer Society), leaders in a field (such as museum directors), well-respected practitioners (such as film directors, for example), or *community-based organizations*.”

### 1.2 Can letters from non-academics “count” the same as letters from traditional academics?

**Yes.** The language in the PES Guidelines about non-traditional reviewers suggests that reviewing committees can weight these letters in the same way as traditional letters. The PES Guidelines

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\*I am an associate professor in psychology at Rutgers University-Camden. This document is a product of the reading I did and conversations I had as I thought about how best to frame my own PES work in the context of my candidacy for promotion. It does not reflect an official endorsement by any specific Rutgers entity. I share it broadly in the hopes that a written document can be a helpful addition to the dialogue at Rutgers as we work together to understand how to apply the PES Guidelines. I welcome conversations and alternative interpretations.

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do not offer any caveats about how these letters are to be used. Instead, the PES Guidelines explicitly state that public figures and community partners can serve as external peer letter writers. This was one of the most puzzling parts of my conversations with colleagues. Almost everyone I spoke with agreed that the PES Guidelines clearly endorsed the meaningful inclusion of non-traditional external letters, but almost everyone I spoke with also thought that *other people* believed these letters “didn’t count”. There is a negative feedback loop: Faculty feel like non-traditional letters *don’t count*, so department chairs don’t solicit them or departments don’t include them in their narrative evaluation, thus reinforcing the perception that they don’t count. However, this perception contradicts the straightforward reading of the PES Guidelines, which suggests that these non-traditional letters *can* count for any reviewing committees (such as a department or a Dean) that *want* to count them.

### 1.3 Even if they *can* count, why *should* they count?

There are at least two arguments for why the perspective of non-academics should “count”, even though they don’t have academic expertise.

**First reason.** PES candidates are working at the forefront of a new kind of scholarly inquiry, just as interdisciplinary scholars do. In the case of traditional interdisciplinary scholars, individual academic letter writers are often able to speak only to one aspect of a candidate’s work. Similarly, public figures might only be able to speak to one part of a PES candidate’s work, but this does not disqualify their letters.

**Second reason.** The PES Guidelines mention the importance of things such as “public consequence”, “why the work matters in terms of the community”, the “co-creation process of the scholarship”, and emphasize that PES is “visible and shared with community stakeholders”. In these areas, non-traditional letter writers may have *more* expertise than traditional writers, and are thus better able to evaluate this aspect of a candidate’s materials.

## 2 Non-traditional products of scholarship

Sometimes, PES work appears in traditional outlets, such as “peer-reviewed journal articles and high quality books”<sup>1</sup>. But it also may appear in non-traditional forms. For example, the PES Guidelines say that PES is “disseminated in ways that are both rigorous and accessible to audiences beyond the academy.” Candidates are asked to address “how and when was the work publicly disseminated.” The following questions address non-traditional products of scholarship in tenure and promotion materials.

### 2.1 What are some examples of non-traditional products of scholarship?

For the most part, the PES Guidelines articulate principles rather than giving examples. The PES Guidelines do specifically give “policy papers, legislation, etc.” as examples. Other universities give additional examples.

**Examples listed by Purdue (fellow Big 10 Alliance member):<sup>2</sup>**

- Video archives
- Documentaries
- Films
- Laws

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<sup>1</sup> Section 60.5.14(A) of Rutgers Policy, via Appendix D of [Academic Reappointment/Promotion Instructions for Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty \(Non-Libraries\) in the AAUP-AFT Negotiations Unit \(2022-23\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Purdue’s [The Guide](#), p11

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- Public policy
  - Delivery of products/services (e.g. training materials, courses, workshops)
  - Professionally-reviewed publications

**Examples from University of North Carolina-Greensboro’s Institute for Community and Economic Engagement:<sup>3</sup>**

- Websites
- Online tools
- Technical reports
- Policy reports
- Programs, and program evaluations
- Legal briefs
- White papers
- Radio programs
- Blogs
- Site plans
- Data sets
- Curriculum plans

**2.2 Since they are often not formally peer-reviewed, how can colleagues/reviewers judge the scholarly value of non-traditional products?**

The challenge is that not all instances of these products are scholarship. To take one example, although *some* websites are scholarship, not *all* websites are scholarship. How ought a reviewer judge?

**2.2.1 Principles in PES Guidelines**

The PES Guidelines provide a definition for public scholarship, as well as some principles that should guide reviewers as they evaluate cases. For example, public scholarship “requires the rigorous application of discipline-related expertise, breaks new ground or is innovative, can be replicated, documented, and has significant impact and public consequences.” In addition, Rutgers Policy<sup>1</sup> describes as scholarship “the development of materials that make information more accessible to researchers, other scholars, and practitioners” and then adds, “As the State University, Rutgers encourages appropriate applications in the discipline or profession to the issues and problems of the State and region.”

Despite these clear principles, it can be difficult to know how to *operationalize* them. Indeed, tenure and promotion policies are designed with flexibility to accommodate the broad range of disciplinary requirements. On the other hand, without a specific rubric (and without the stamp of peer-review or a journal impact factor), how can a reviewer know if a specific product (such as a website or curriculum plan) fits these principles? Fortunately, peer universities have provided examples of operationalization that are consistent with Rutgers policies and PES guidelines.

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<sup>3</sup>Honoring the Mosaic of Talents and Stewarding the Standards of High Quality Community-Engaged Scholarship(p5, p10)

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### 2.2.2 Operationalizing principles

Many peer institutions<sup>4</sup> use a rubric published by [Community-Campus Partnerships for Health](#) that includes a set of eight criteria of scholarship and accompanying indicators. The argument is that these eight criteria underlie all scholarship, not just PES. In more traditional scholarship, making it through peer-review is an implicit indicator that a product meets these criteria. In PES, a candidate may need to provide evidence or arguments that these criteria have been met.

#### Eight Characteristics of Scholarship

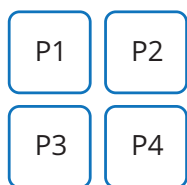
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|---|----------------------------|
| 1. Clear goals                          | 5. Effective communication |
| 2. Adequate preparation in content area | 6. Reflective critique     |
| 3. Appropriate methods                  | 7. Personal contribution   |
| 4. Significant results                  | 8. Ethical behavior        |

The attached pdf has a rubric for evaluating scholarship that includes the PES Guidelines, these eight criteria of scholarship, and indicators of what these criteria look like in PES.

### 2.3 What if an individual product doesn't meet all these characteristics? Can it still “count” as scholarship?

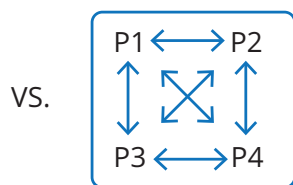
**Yes, in some cases.** Sometimes, a specific product might not be considered scholarship on its own, but it can serve to establish a larger body of work as scholarly. Thus, judging whether an individual *item* is scholarship often requires understanding the *portfolio* of work in a line of scholarly inquiry. For example, judging whether a website is scholarship will depend on the website itself (see criteria above), but may also depend on the process of creating the website<sup>5</sup>, how the website is used, and how the website relates to other products of scholarship. In some cases, the scholarly value of a particular product will be clear (as in the “item approach” below). However, because PCES involves multiple audiences and often also blurs the lines between teaching, service, and research, a reviewing committee will sometimes need to understand several products in a line of scholarship in order to make a judgement about one specific product (as in the “portfolio approach” below).

#### Item approach



Is P1 scholarship?  
Is P2 scholarship?  
etc.

#### Portfolio approach



Does {P1, P2, P3, P4} constitute scholarship?

While the PES Guidelines guidelines do not explicitly articulate the difference between an item approach and a portfolio approach, this interpretation is implied by the PES Guidelines section on the responsibilities for candidates in writing their narratives. In this section, the PES Guidelines emphasize that candidates must frame the scholarly nature of their body of work by answering such questions as “What new scholarship

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<sup>4</sup>Here are a few universities that, as of early 2023, explicitly reference these criteria in their tenure and promotion processes or in public documents about ongoing revisions to tenure and promotion policies: Purdue, Portland State University, University of Arizona, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, University of South Florida, University of North-Carolina, Greensboro. [CES4Health](#), an entity that organizes peer-review of health-focused, community-facing products of scholarship, also uses these criteria.

<sup>5</sup>Other discussions about the importance of process are found in the University of North Carolina-Greensboro's Institute for Community and Economic Engagement [report](#)(p11).

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has this work stimulated? What additional events/scholarship/partnerships did the work stimulate? What are the works implications for policy? Practice? Why does this work matter in terms of the community in which the scholarship was conducted (or of broader public or community interests)?”

### 3 External Funding

It is clear that a federally funded research grant (such as from NIH or NSF) counts as evidence of scholarship. There is more ambiguity about contracts and other funding.

#### 3.1 Can contracts “count” as scholarship?

**Yes.** As with other non-traditional products of scholarship, a contract *can* count as scholarship, but not all contracts are evidence of scholarship. The PES Guidelines suggest that candidates explain how the work was “valued by an outside entity” through funding, and to explain how the candidate contributed to fundraising. These questions imply that contracts can count as scholarly funding.

#### 3.2 When do contracts “count” as scholarship, and when do they “count” as service?

The PES Guidelines don’t say this explicitly, but a reasonable inference is that a contract counts as scholarship if the products of the contract contributed to a body of scholarly work. For example, a candidate could show how products resulting from the contract impacted the community and/or a disciplinary field or how the “effort/work integrated into teaching and/or mentoring” (PES Guidelines).

### 4 Some additional context

Below is a list of additional readings for anyone who wants to learn more about the landscape of PES in higher education.

- [This report](#) from the Big 10 provides a succinct history of how views on PES in higher education are evolving. It describes what PES is and why it matters, and it provides an argument for why tenure and promotion policies must be revised to better recognize PES. Although it is written for the arts, the principles are applicable to social sciences.
- [Imagining America](#) provided a thoughtful analysis of PES in higher education, including a nice definition of public scholarship and a conversation about what should count as scholarship and why.
- [The Guide](#), from Purdue, is a practical guide for PES in tenure and promotion. A valuable feature is a set of vignettes describing the engaged scholarship of faculty in different disciplines.
- [This longer report](#) from UCLA gives insight into the messy process of different faculty perspectives on PES in a university struggling with how to respond to calls for better recognition of PES. The quotes from individual faculty and administrators provide a more personal engagement.