IJRSLCE | International Journal of Research on Service-Learning & Community Engagement

Volume 14 | Issue 1

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Recommended Citation
Flores, M. G. (2026). Engaged Scholars Navigating a Conditioned Legitimacy: World-class University and Agency. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, *14*(1).
https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.173664

International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement
Volume 14, Issue 1 | 2026 | ISSN: 2374-9466 | https://ijrslce.scholasticahq.com/

Engaged Scholars Navigating a Conditioned Legitimacy: World-Class University and Agency

Matías G. Flores

Abstract
Chile is experiencing a national reform in community engagement, which has renewed interest in this field and spurred academic debate and research publications, new academic journals, networks, and events. This scenario, however, has not brought legitimacy to engaged scholars within their institutions, where they struggle to justify their work. The purpose of this article is to analyze the specific agentic practices used by engaged scholars in Santiago, Chile, to earn and maintain legitimacy in their universities, in a context shaped by accreditation policies and global university rankings. This qualitative research used ethnographic research methods, participant observation, and interviews with 52 scholars from two universities (one public and one private) in Santiago, Chile. Findings describe a conditioned legitimacy and three agentic practices used by engaged scholars in Chile to earn and maintain legitimacy: operationalizing, negotiating, and resisting.

Keywords: *community engagement, Latin American university, legitimacy, sociology of higher education, vinculación con el medio, world-class university*

Académicos vinculados con el medio navegando una legitimidad condicionada: Universidad de Clase Mundial y agencia

Matías G. Flores

Resumen
Chile experimenta una reforma nacional en vinculación con el medio, que ha renovado el interés en este campo y estimulado el debate académico, las publicaciones de investigación, nuevas revistas científicas, redes y eventos. Sin embargo, este escenario no se ha traducido en una mayor legitimidad para los académicos vinculados con el medio al interior de sus instituciones, donde aún enfrentan dificultades para justificar su labor. El propósito de este artículo es analizar las prácticas agenciales específicas desplegadas por académicos vinculados con el medio en Santiago de Chile para adquirir y mantener legitimidad dentro de sus universidades, en un contexto configurado por las políticas de acreditación y los rankings universitarios globales. Esta investigación cualitativa empleó métodos etnográficos, observación participante y entrevistas a 52 académicos de dos universidades (una pública y una privada) de Santiago de Chile. Los hallazgos describen una legitimidad condicionada y tres prácticas agenciales utilizadas por los académicos comprometidos en Chile para obtener y preservar dicha legitimidad: operacionalizar, negociar y resistir.

Palabras clave: *extensión universitaria, universidad latinoamericana, legitimidad, sociología de la educación superior, vinculación con el medio, universidad de clase mundial.*

*Editors' Note: Translation provided by **Matías G. Flores***
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Introduction

Chile is experiencing a reform in community engagement (CE), which has renewed the interest in this topic and spurred academic debate and research publications, new academic journals, networks, and events (Flores, 2024b). In 2018, the new higher education law, which emerged as a partial response to the massive 2011 student movement (Ríos-Jara, 2025), established that all higher education institutions must be accredited in CE by 2025. In 2024, several seminars and conferences were organized in Chile to share best practices and discuss the importance of CE in higher education. In one of them, Víctor Orellana Calderón, the undersecretary of higher education of the Ministry of Education, acknowledged how engaged scholars and university staff had been key agents in promoting CE:

> You represent a living force in the processes that higher education is carrying out today. There is a real, incipient, but true movement for CE (. . .). These are the movements that create changes. Public policies create conditions for change, but social transformations occur at the base of society; they are not created by decrees. (Orellana Calderón, 2024)

Attendees, mostly from public universities, were moved by his speech, and some commented to me that it was not very common for CE events to have this kind of authority as a keynote speaker and even less to be praised in such a way. I observed a similar experience at another event that same year, oriented mainly to engaged scholars and staff from private universities. The organizers invited keynote speakers from Chile, Mexico, and the United States, who shared their practices and models. Both events were not only useful for these scholars' and staff's daily work but also helped participants feel part of a broader movement to institutionalize CE as a legitimate academic practice. This experience contrasts with their everyday institutional contexts, where engaged scholars often struggle to justify CE work and to earn and maintain legitimacy.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the agentic practices used by engaged scholars in Santiago, Chile, to earn and maintain legitimacy in their universities, in a context shaped by accreditation policies and global university rankings. The main research question organizing this work is: How do engaged scholars in Chile earn and maintain legitimacy for CE within institutional contexts shaped by world-class university standards? To explore this question, the article continues with a description of the Chilean case. The literature review focuses on three main areas: world-class university, Chilean scholars' subjectivity, CE, and legitimacy. The theoretical framework draws from global isomorphism, where the world-class university ideal is interpreted as a governance force, and agency, which is defined as the ways of earning and maintaining legitimacy. Research methods are drawn from interpretivist and critical epistemology and qualitative methodologies. I used ethnographic research methods, participant observation, and interviews with 52 scholars from two universities (one public and one private) in Santiago, Chile. Then, the main findings and results include the relationship between CE and the world-class university through accreditation and three agentic practices: operationalizing, negotiating, and resistance. I conclude by connecting the underlying legitimacy tensions behind CE in Chile with the potential to challenge hegemonic university models.

Higher Education and CE in Chile

Since the 1980s, the Chilean higher education system has experienced a massification and privatization process (Labraña & Brunner, 2021). The system has been described as an example of academic capitalism (Brunner et al., 2020) where universities have to compete for student enrollment to survive and comply with global standards (Labraña et al., 2019). Chilean universities have also been pressured to participate in international rankings on the path to becoming a world-class university (Sáez et al., 2023).

The combination of massification, privatization, and academic capitalism created an eruption of low-quality institutions. In response, in 2006, a public and autonomous quality assurance system was created. The National Accreditation Commission (NAC) linked the possibility of accessing public funding to a

minimum institutional accreditation (Mireya Davila, 2021). CE (in Spanish, *vinculación con el medio*) was one of the voluntary areas within that institutional accreditation.

The implementation of the quality assurance system, however, was limited, and not all institutions participated in the accreditation process. In 2018, a new higher education law transformed this voluntary accreditation into a mandatory process, where all higher education institutions should be accredited in CE by 2025 (Flores, 2024b). The main requirements for accreditation in CE refer to the need for an internal policy that secures funding opportunities, bidirectional relations with significant stakeholders, CE integration with teaching and research processes, and the need to evaluate the contributions of these efforts (Casas & Torralbo, 2022). This signals a departure from other Latin American countries that, while also drawing from the Latin American CE ethos (Flores et al., 2023), have alternative national frameworks, such as the more autonomous case of Uruguay, or those establishing compulsory CE programs, such as the social service in Mexico (Cano Menoni & Flores, 2023).

Recent studies have shown the effectiveness of the Chilean reform, where most higher education institutions have participated in the accreditation process and adopted the CE terms (Araya Alarcón, 2024; Fleet et al., 2022). Guzmán et al. (2022) have shown how private and public universities actively participate in CE. Alarcón and Brunner (2024) found that most faculty members consider CE important for institutional development, individual academic work, and their academic reputation.

In the Chilean academic debate, the accreditation in CE has been accused of being another way of contributing to academic capitalism, erasing the tradition of *extensión universitaria*, which aimed toward social justice and emancipation (González López, 2018). To others, it is an opportunity to rethink the social mission of universities and improve what is considered a traditional or one-way CE (Espinoza, 2021; Pastene, 2021). In a study on university leadership and CE, Labraña et al. (2023) identified that while the accreditation system promoted an emphasis on CE through new public management, there is a persistence of the Latin American tradition of CE.

Literature Review

World-Class University

The concept of world-class university describes the "governance force" (Benner, 2020) or "regime" (Gonzales & Núñez, 2021), orienting higher education policies by their performance on global rankings of universities. Global rankings created in the 2000s, such as the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities, Quacquarelli Symonds ranking, and Times Higher Education ranking, have consolidated a vision of universities following the U.S. research university model, favoring research, international awards, and productivity expressed in publications in high-impact journals (Rider et al., 2020). This standardized vision of universities has been criticized for downgrading the value of other university missions (Benner, 2020).

These rankings reproduce the unequal division between peripheries and metropolitan forces in the global system of knowledge production (Labraña et al., 2019; Schulze-Cleven et al., 2017), threatening other university models, such as the postcolonial Latin American university (Bernasconi, 2015). To Lloyd and Ordorika (2021), these global rankings have served as cultural imperialism, installing an impossible task of "catching up" with Global North institutions. Local complicities can reinforce world-class standards, adapting curriculum to Global North models, using rankings as a criterion for resource allocation, defining student mobility, faculty recruitment, and prioritizing research partnerships abroad (Lee & Naidoo, 2020). However, Global South institutions are not just victims of an external force. According to Lee and Naidoo (2020), Global South universities can appropriate and accept, promote slight modifications, or reject and subvert the standards.

Chilean Scholars' Subjectivity

The growing participation of Chilean universities in global rankings, together with public policies oriented by those standards (Ganga-Contreras et al., 2024), exemplifies the complicit reproduction of the world-class university discourse in Chile. The Chilean scientific system and universities have developed managerial tools to promote high-quality research, such as competitive grants distributed by individual productivity indicators, performance-based evaluations and contracts, economic incentives for publications, and accountability for monitoring productivity (Fardella, 2021).

The impact of the world-class university and the national quality assurance system on the academic profession in Chile is notable. Recent studies have shown an increasing number of full-time professors, a percentage of professors with doctoral degrees, and the number of publications oriented toward high-quality journals (Bernasconi et al., 2021). Chilean scholars have embodied the principles of a world-class university seeking merit, recognition, and prestige through a focus on research and connection to a global circuit (Fardella, 2021) and legitimacy among their peers under a meritocracy discourse through self-discipline and self-demanding (Fardella et al., 2024).

Even though this acceptance seems to be a trend, a "silenced activism" has been observed in scholars resisting managerial tools that are perceived as a colonization of the historical culture of academic work, based on reflexivity and collaboration practices (Fardella et al., 2022). Under this world-class university regime, Chilean scholars experience labor malaise, job insecurity, stress, fatigue, and burnout (Soto & Fardella, 2019). In response, they have created strategies to sustain their positions, such as strengthening associativity and cooperation in publications as a way of dealing with labor insecurity (Fardella Cisternas et al., 2020, 2022).

CE and Legitimacy

O'Meara identified three main barriers for engaged scholars in the United States: faculty socialization through doctoral education, faculty work being mainly private, and different assumptions between engaged scholars and "traditional" scholars (O'Meara, 2011). Following that last barrier, O'Meara identified a legitimacy struggle that engaged scholars have to endure, expressed in an inequality regime where their work is constantly perceived as less prestigious and motivated by personal reasons. Within this regime, campus cultures and reward systems prioritize traditional research, forcing engaged scholars to continually negotiate both their status and the value of their work (O'Meara, 2016).

Similar barriers are observed in other countries in the Global South. In South Africa, challenges include limited funding, unclear conceptualization, no agreement on the need for CE, the idea that engagement is a luxury, a lack of implementation, and unequal power dynamics (Johnson, 2020). Likewise, in Malawi, higher education institutions lack clear guidelines and definitions, competitive ways to access funding, informal procedures, and a lack of institutional rewards (Nkhoma, 2015).

In Chile, while research has shown that CE is important for scholars in general (Alarcón & Brunner, 2024), little is known about the reasons for that importance or the struggles engaged scholars face. Looking at a public university, Dougnac Quintana (2018) identified three barriers: a lack of valorization in the academic promotion system, a scarcity of funding and organizational support, and a lack of clarity in the definitions. At the institutional level, Salazar Alvarado (2022) found a different valorization of CE between institutions that just want to obtain accreditation and those trying to recover the Latin American university tradition.

In sum, these three bodies of literature show how Chilean scholars, in general, have responded to the governance force of the world-class university and its expectations to focus on research and publications. Chilean studies on CE have shown that institutions struggle to define and institutionalize the value of CE. These studies, however, tend to be more descriptive, identifying "barriers" without connecting the experience of engaged scholars with broader global forces in higher education. This article addresses this gap by analyzing the agentic practices used by engaged scholars to earn and maintain legitimacy.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses a sociohistorical approach to study CE (Flores, 2024a). Drawing from the sociology of higher education and neo-institutionalism, I understand universities as complex institutions entangled in the broader context of sociopolitical dynamics (Gumport, 2007) and driven by global forces that generate a process of *global isomorphism*, developed through rankings and accreditations (Meyer et al., 2007). Global isomorphism refers to the tendencies of universities to historically share similar characteristics and patterns beyond national differences (Meyer et al., 2007).

Although some may consider neo-institutionalism a theory that justifies the world-class university (Burawoy, 2017), in this study, I will understand the world-class university is not inherently a good or superior university model but the hegemonic and legitimized force that is currently organizing universities (Benner, 2020). This hegemonic force can be, and is, accepted, negotiated, and resisted by institutions and scholars (Lee & Naidoo, 2020; Lloyd & Ordorika, 2021).

To understand these responses to the global isomorphism, I will draw on the work on legitimacy and agency developed by Gonzales (2014, 2015). Following Archer's effort to account for the relation between agency and structure, Gonzales understands agency as "acts of resistance, or at the least, negotiation intended to advance professors' notions of the public good against the implications wrought by striving contexts" (Gonzales, 2015, p. 304). These acts of resistance or negotiation are oriented "to earn or maintain a space of legitimacy within academia" (Gonzales, 2014, p. 198) and are rooted in broader sociocultural dynamics.

In her analysis of the U.S. scholars, Gonzales (2014) defined three categories that will be used to analyze scholars' agency. First, *operationalizing* refers to the scholars' actions toward advancing and complying with top-tier research universities' institutional scripts. Second, *negotiating* refers to scholars working between institutional scripts, holding back part of their own interests. And third, *resisting*, referring to scholars who had not changed their practices or rejected proposed institutional scripts. Following Gonzales's work, O'Meara understands legitimacy in the context of the academic profession as fitting and standing as an acceptable and viable member of a field or profession (O'Meara, 2016). While O'Meara understands "traditional scholarship" as the example of legitimacy, in this study, the world-class university is the benchmark for the institutional expectations, with scholars complying, negotiating, or resisting.

Research Methods

My epistemological stance draws from interpretivism and critical perspectives (Jones et al., 2022), which means I understand reality as socially constructed, focusing on the experience and agency of subjects to interpret a certain phenomenon based on their perspectives, and at the same time, I understand that the said agency is embedded in a sociohistorical context and structures. This stance also gives elements to question my positionality and political motivation as a researcher and the impact of my research on a broader context where there is no neutral approach to knowledge production. Recognizing my own subjectivity and how it affects my research is something that I process through a reflexivity process as a continuous effort during the research process.

Regarding research methods, my research project is a relational (Desmond, 2014), meso-level (Anderson, 2021), and global (Burawoy, 2001) ethnography. Guided by ethnographic methods (Jones et al., 2022; Shumar, 2004), my data collection includes two main techniques. First, semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 40 engaged scholars and 12 considered "nonengaged scholars." The script included questions on their personal and academic trajectory, their vision of their institution, and the connection with their sociopolitical context. The questions and script were reviewed by two experts in the field, one of whom was from Chile. Interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder, and I transcribed them in Spanish first using software (Rev) then listened to the audio to correct any errors. Second, I conducted participant observation at three public conferences and two internal CE meetings, where I observed their interactions and discussions. Fieldwork was conducted between July 2023 and May 2024 in Santiago, Chile. I developed a research journal describing the context and main insights from fieldwork.

Sampling was a purposeful process oriented to obtain information-rich cases and maximum variation (Jones et al., 2022). It considered three levels: country, institutions, and actors. The Chilean case is relevant to understanding how CE is practiced in the Global South in a context of tension between neoliberal policies in higher education and a Latin American university tradition. The two selected universities (one public and one private) are accredited by the NAC in CE and have internal policies and structures to organize the projects, offer internal funding, and organize internal seminars. Regarding actors, I contacted the directors of the two universities' CE offices and asked them for an initial list of engaged scholars from different disciplines. After this initial list, I used a snowball strategy, following their recommendations to talk with other engaged scholars and those whom they considered "nonengaged" scholars (see Table 1). Nonengaged scholars, then, are those perceived by engaged scholars as traditional scholars who do not actively participate in CE projects and were not included in the initial list. Disciplines included education, arts, humanities, social sciences, life sciences, health sciences, veterinary, and mathematics.

Table 1.

Engaged and Nonengaged Scholars

Category	*Subcategory*	*Number of engaged scholars*	*Number of nonengaged scholars*	*Total*
University affiliation	Public university	20	6	26
	Private university	20	6	26
Gender	Female	21	3	24
	Male	18	9	27
	Nonbinary	1	0	1
Years in academia	Less than 15 years	26	1	27
	15 years or more	14	11	25

Participant observation was conducted at three public conferences organized by the universities or networks where the institutions actively participate. I was invited to attend by the CE directors, who told me that some engaged scholars would participate. I also asked the directors to attend two internal meetings. The attendees were aware of and approved my participant observation in these meetings. My observation focused on conversations and discussions on the legitimacy of CE, institutional support, and peer support.

Data analysis was a deductive content analysis. The line-by-line coding was guided by the concept of legitimacy, which was operationalized into two categories: "institutional support" and "peer support." Drawing from institutionalization evaluation tools on CE (Farnell et al., 2020; Furco et al., 2009), both categories included the following subcategories:

- Institutional support: CE definition, strategic planning, university mission, relation to other education reforms, coordinating and policymaking entities, staffing, and funding
- Peer support: faculty knowledge and awareness, involvement, leadership, value, incentives, and rewards, teaching, and learning

Themes were identified as part of three main agentic practices: operationalizing, negotiating, and resistance. I applied the same deductive data analysis to my field notes, coding my notes and identifying arguments and themes that appeared during my participant observation. This side-to-side work implied an iterative category-building process. The writing process and communication of results combined a description of the main themes and a thick description to share the experience of scholars.

Ethical considerations included submitting my project to the Cornell University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and ensuring the welfare of the research subjects following the Belmont Report. Every interviewee signed and agreed to an informed consent form (revised and commented on by the IRB). I did

not use their legal names, community partners' names, real locations, institutional affiliations, or any other identifiable information in my records and transcriptions.

In terms of rigor, transparency, and quality of the data, I focused on reflexivity, conducting a systematic analysis of my own subjectivity, assumptions, personal interests, prejudices, and credibility (Jones et al., 2022), through consultation with experts in the field to review my data collection instruments and the triangulation between interviews and my fieldwork journal. I wrote a research journal throughout the process to register the evolution of my thinking and how my positionality may have influenced the research process. This included, during fieldwork, day-by-day note-taking describing observations, the interview process, and the setting, and adding distinctive methodological, theoretical, and emotional/feeling notes or memos. I did not try to eliminate or repress my subjectivity but rather to critically observe how it shaped my work.

I am writing from the position of a cisgender male from Chile, with a professional background in public universities in Chile, social movement activism, and membership in a left-wing political party, and educated within the Latin Americanist tradition of critical thinking. As my professional background is rooted primarily in public universities in Chile, I sought to balance cases from both public and private universities. Complementing this institutional balance, the sampling strategy was designed to capture a multivocality that follows different disciplines, genders, points of view, actors, and types of experiences (community-based learning, engaged research, and specific CE projects). While sampling followed a snowball strategy, participants were purposively selected from the recommendations to ensure a heterogeneous group.

My Latin American critical thinking background allowed me to identify, from my previous experience in CE, different power dynamics within universities that shaped the research questions; this approach was purposefully balanced, seeking to account for beyond dialectical binarism through a theoretical framework focused on agentic practices. I had no previous connection to any of the universities included in the sampling. Rapport was built through my familiarity with the field of CE in Chile since 2014 and my permanent contact with institution members (i.e., *gatekeepers*). The analysis was conducted in the original language of the interviewees (Spanish), and the translations of quotes were made by me.

One limitation of the study, as with any other qualitative study, is its lack of generalizability. The anonymity of scholars' names, disciplines, and institutions hinders the depth of the data provided. Looking at other institutions, such as religious and regional universities, could have improved the array of agentic practices. Another limitation and possible bias comes from the fact that only one researcher recruited research participants, conducted and transcribed the interviews, observed research participants, and analyzed the data. I balanced this limitation by sharing my positionality reflection and being transparent with the data collection and data analysis process.

Findings

Findings are presented in four sections. The first section describes the relation between the world-class university and CE from the perspective of engaged and nonengaged scholars. The other three sections describe each agentic practice of engaged scholars to earn and maintain legitimacy.

World-Class University and CE

Engaged scholars and nonengaged scholars agree that CE is not part of the legitimate institutional script of the university under the standards of a world-class university. They claim the main expectation of the university is for them to dedicate themselves mainly to research and publish in top journals. CE, in contrast, is tolerated mainly as a response to a requirement of state agencies, primarily, the NAC's mandatory accreditation and, secondarily, national science grants.

In their discourse, it appears as a *conditioned legitimacy*. For instance, if funding is designated, it should be a small percentage; if time is allocated, it should not interfere with research or publications. Under this institutional script, CE is perceived as an optional and a lesser grade academic work that does

not contribute to research. Rather it is viewed as an endeavor that should only be carried out after you have consolidated a position as a researcher and completed the indicators specified in your performance-based contract. In the words of Mario, a high authority in a school of social sciences (nonengaged scholar, public university):

> CE is the thing that fell into those who do not do other things. I mean, those working the most on CE are those who do not do research, those who do not publish, those who do not have a certain name, so to speak [laughs] . . . they are like the laborers.

Héctor, a senior researcher in STEM (nonengaged scholar, private university) who leads a research institute with many publications in top journals, when asked what he would recommend for a new scholar who is interested in CE, reflects:

> Here, let's say, everyone is free to organize their line of work. However, we have certain rules within the institute to abide by, right? Which are our evaluations? So, if by doing that [CE], you stop doing research, they will probably tell you, "Fine, but there is no place here. Go somewhere else in the university where that is the main objective."

Andrea, a full-time STEM professor (engaged scholar, public university), was hired on a 6-year performance-based contract after completing her PhD. She organized CE events promoting inclusion through STEM education. She received the support of the city mayor, and the department loved it. She also managed to publish articles in indexed journals, as required in her contract. However, something changed a few months before the contract renewal deadline. The university unilaterally changed its requirements under pressure to meet world-class standards, standards that now Andrea did not meet. Andrea claims, "I lost my other job because I was so dedicated to doing this [CE project]." To maintain her new position, she adapted: "Now I am much more careful in all the things I do, and I try to comply with the requirement, more than anything else, for which I was hired, which is research."

Operationalizing

The first agentic practice identified is operationalizing, where engaged scholars find a way to attune their CE projects within the space offered by the conditioned legitimacy.

Considering institutional support, operationalizing engaged scholars' claim that universities still value CE because obtaining accreditation serves as a proxy for excellence and reputation, enhancing universities' communicational image and status. Within this limited acceptance, the main challenge for operationalizing engaged scholars is to improve managerial processes and efficiency: How can the university do more CE and better CE projects with fewer resources? How can the data collection processes be improved for efficient reporting to the NAC?

Scholars explain that the key managerial tool used by the universities is the division of labor, by hiring part-time lecturers or adjunct professors to only develop community-based learning classes. These engaged scholars usually do not have doctoral degrees but have a longtime connection to community partners because they developed a professional career or participated in NGOs or grassroots organizations. In the case of full-time professors, the university offers them the option to include CE goals on their performance-based annual evaluation or free hours from their schedule to develop CE projects.

Engaged scholars under this agentic practice earn and maintain legitimacy through their efficiency in reporting the results of CE projects, the number of internal and external funding and grants acquired, and memorandums of understanding signed with community members (one of the NAC's indicators). In return, engaged scholars expect university's support through the professionalization of the CE staff, clear strategic planning and concepts, and straightforward registration forms and indicators and in fundraising.

From my participant observation notes, I identify how university CE meetings, which gather representatives from all schools and academic departments, focus most of their time on managerial and administrative topics. At the public university, I observed the leadership read and distribute printed versions of the NAC's CE standards and facilitated a workshop on implementing those standards at the

local level. Similarly, at the private university meeting, the leadership reinforced the importance of correctly completing the CE registration forms and announced that they were going to implement new quantitative indicators to allow comparison among different schools.

In terms of peers' support, operationalizing engaged scholars claim that CE is still perceived mainly as something in the margins of academic work. The division of labor reinforces the idea that this is an optional job, not for all scholars. Nonetheless, they find traces of legitimacy when the university awards them, invites them to present at their internal seminar or conferences, or showcases their project on the university website. Another source of legitimacy is based on the perceived contribution of CE to undergraduate teaching and learning, where students access real job experience, apply knowledge, and develop soft skills. For others, it is also perceived as something "nice," "beautiful," and morally "good."

For instance, Eva, an adjunct professor in the legal service clinic at a law school (engaged scholar, private university), loves working in this program and believes she is doing something intrinsically "good" and "beautiful." Through direct conversations with colleagues and the dean, she also knows that everybody values the program. It is valued as a crucial step before students become lawyers, "the cherry on top of the cake," she claims. Eva is grateful for the NAC's accreditation, as it triggered permanent support from the university, channeled through the office of CE. This support included small grants and the introduction of a software package to offer online legal services, monitor cases, and report key indicators. The program offices are at the campus entrance, so community members can access them directly, while the offices of full-time professors are in separate buildings. All engaged scholars working in the clinic, including the director, work as an adjunct professor. None of them is required to conduct research or publish.

Luis, who works in the field of life science (engaged scholar, private university), leads a community-based learning course and has obtained two small grants to conduct CE projects. After working for several years as an adjunct professor, he got into a tenure-track position and is considering studying for a PhD. Now that he is also required to conduct research and publish to be promoted, he realizes that his work and experience in CE is not what the university is expecting as a long-term academic career:

> Because of these two [CE] projects, I moved up a level, but I am still far from being tenured and all that. I feel that it is still not recognized, (. . .) they do not have the same value. Doing research and doing CE at [this university] are different worlds. And there is, I think, still a huge gap.

Then, while operationalizing is an agentic practice that allows engaged scholars to maintain a space within the university, the underlying assumption behind the division of labor is that CE is optional and secondary. Operationalizing works as long as the scholar wants to stay in the adjunct professor position. But, as observed in other cases, whenever they wish to expand and explore the connections between CE and research, tension appears.

Negotiating

Negotiating is an agentic practice in which engaged scholars, in order to earn and maintain legitimacy, depend on their personal capacity for enduring harsh conditions and their efforts to convince their colleagues that what they are doing is relevant academic work.

Negotiating, engaged scholars perceive institutional support as limited. For example, CE small grants are less prestigious than research grants; budgeting processes can take months, and purchasing workshop materials can take years. The percentage of grants dedicated to CE feels like leftovers, and justifying expenses is always a struggle. Behind the lack of resources and support, negotiating engaged scholars believe the university underplays CE's real value. Full-time professors claim that the hours designated for CE are less than necessary. Additionally, adjunct professors, who have restricted access to university resources, depend on full-time professors to be formally registered as responsible for the small grant projects or to send emails on their behalf. As a result, full-time professors receive formal credit, leaving adjunct professors positioned as mere collaborators, even when they created and led the project.

Negotiating is an agentic practice that helps engaged scholars navigate and endure these wanting conditions. They call it a *circo pobre*, a Chilean expression that translates as "poor circus." It refers to a person—the performer—who must fulfill too many roles to compensate for the lack of resources. It is both a critique of an unequal situation and a seldom romanticized and heroic action (the performer endures the situation).

Negotiating engaged scholars develop strategies and tricks to advance their projects while complying with university expectations and accreditation indicators. These strategies include "saving" data from 1 year to be reported the following year and purchasing materials 1 year in advance to anticipate administrative constraints. They also rely on personal connections to obtain resources or accelerate purchasing processes. In addition, negotiating engaged scholars frequently work overtime on the weekends, use their own resources to cover transportation costs, invite family members to help them, and lead their communication campaigns.

For instance, Claudia, an adjunct professor in the field of arts (engaged scholar, public university), whose CE project seeks to recover traditional Chilean culture, organizes massive events that congregate traditional artists from all over the country. She remembers that in the first version of the event:

> Many students helped me. I led it; another one was in charge of marketing; another one was in charge of even cooking because many traditional artists came and (. . .) if we bring people from the countryside . . . we have to give them food! [laughs] And who provides the food? Between all of us making communal meals. Tell me, where have you seen that? [laughs] I remember I obtained some tablecloths, someone donated me a cake (. . .), my own family brought things to donate . . . something like . . . I don't know how to phrase it. Of course, it becomes a romantic situation. But it's like, "Hey! Why does it have to cost so much?" (. . .) They were just people convinced of the transcendence of this (. . .). There was pure conviction that what was being done was right, it was fair.

In the interviews, negotiating engaged scholars manifest a feeling of resignation and inevitability, where some are not expecting anything from the university. They justify this situation because all academic work seems to be like this. In their view, most scholars work on the weekends or after office hours. Some argue that all engaged scholars should have a "thick skin" and high frustration tolerance. During my participant observation at public conferences, I noticed that negotiating engaged scholars, usually at the conclusion of their presentations, included reflections on the difficulties of implementing CE projects. After summarizing their project and its relevance, they let the audience know that, even though it was accepted into institutional policies, they still felt left behind.

In terms of peer's support, negotiating engaged scholars dispute the idea that CE is an optional work and try to make the case that it is valuable in itself. To do so, they draw from other sources of legitimacy beyond the mandatory accreditation and the usefulness of preparing students for the job market. First, CE is seen as necessary in a country with multiple social problems and urgencies (legitimacy from the community). Second, it is argued that students are invested in CE programs for their own interests in social issues, not just to become better professionals (legitimacy from the students). Third, negotiating engaged scholars position themselves within emerging lines of work in their discipline, usually connected to broader participation or innovation, expressed in their involvement in recently created networks (legitimacy from the discipline).

Negotiating engaged scholars also reject the idea that CE is merely "nice" or "beautiful," as some of their colleagues suggest. They argue that such characterizations are paternalistic and serve to downgrade CE as subjective or non-evidence-based science, lesser grade, irrelevant, and even unsophisticated or frivolous. Paulina, a full-time professor in the field of the humanities (engaged scholar, public university), reflects:

> When I talk about my research topics [they tell me] "how interesting!" The [CE project] is "nice." And I feel that this lowers its status (. . .) because since it is not research, I think it is immediately

> assumed that there is no scientific knowledge behind it. And not having science behind it would be something much more subjective, (. . .) more trivial.

Then, negotiating engaged scholars such as Paulina seek to demonstrate the connection between CE and research by creating research grant applications based on CE project results, writing articles about the context surrounding their projects, or using the data from impact evaluations as primary sources.

However, negotiating has a limit. If a CE project succeeds, the university often asks negotiating engaged scholars to expand and replicate it without providing additional resources, leading them to question whether continuing under these conditions is fair. Over time, they start to see that the university benefits from their self-exploitation. How long can an engaged scholar endure before it becomes too much? Some even ask themselves: Are there alternative ways to understand the value of CE?

Resisting

Resisting becomes an agentic practice for engaged scholars who reject several principles of the world-class university and the standardization of academic work. They argue that CE should be at the center of academic work and that all institutions should be oriented to influence society.

Engaged scholars under this agentic practice believe CE is an opportunity to recover the role the university once had, tracing back to the historical tradition of Chilean universities before the military dictatorship. A combination of the history of *extensión universitaria* (such as programs at Universidad de Chile, Universidad de Concepción, and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, worker movements' educational programs, and popular education inspired by Paulo Freire); the current critical CE movement (particularly the work developed at Universidad de la República, Uruguay); and the Latin American network of public universities, *Asociación de Universidades Grupo de Montevideo* (AUGM), appears as references of a different understanding of the university mission. Particularly at one conference, organized by a network of public universities, I observed how both keynote speakers included historical references at the beginning of their presentations, stating that contemporary CE work developed in their institutions draws from a broader and older definition of university committed to Chilean society.

In an interview, Jorge, a full-time professor in the field of social science (engaged scholar, public university), explains that he feels part of a broader movement reimagining the university project:

> When you teach a class, you know, or apply for a CE project, it is very important because it makes you feel part of a project, of a university project, it makes you feel part of a . . . of something, right? And when you propose that to a student, what the university project is, what it means, they also feel part of something.

Under this agentic practice, engaged scholars consider institutional support insufficient and question the managerial tools, particularly the measurement of impact required by the NAC, which, in their view, reduces the complexity of a CE project and interrupts the pace of their projects. They reject the university's suggestion to create paid continuing education programs and to showcase their projects on social media because they observe a marketization of CE.

Regarding peers' recognition, resisting engaged scholars perceive rejection from their colleagues. Their peers go beyond thinking CE is lesser grade academic work (conditioned legitimacy); they neglect the academic nature of CE work. Engaged scholars face censorship for being too political, accused in some cases of being "communists," "anarchists," and even "terrorists." In other cases, they are accused of degrading the discipline or denying that those disciplinary groups or tendencies exist. They are then in a permanent defensive stance, trying to prove their work is valuable, real, and not ideologically driven.

Carla, an adjunct professor in the field of health (engaged scholar, private university), had to change her project's name to something more "neutral" because it was the name used by grassroots organizations. She and her colleague were accused of "revolutionizing" students. The university also censored specific questions in an interview they conducted with a Ministry involved in an environmental conflict. Carla's colleague was fired after these episodes, and Carla ended up isolated within the department, tempering

her projects to align with what was institutionally legitimized: community-based learning classes with community partners that already had a memorandum of understanding. Now she claims:

> I will never be able to do what I want because, at least with the current administration, everything is very biased, it's all very standardized, you can't express yourself, you can't do what you want. If they don't approve of something, they simply take the project away from you.

However, not all resisting engaged scholars are isolated. Most of them usually participate in academic collectives and interuniversity networks. Through those spaces, they are mentored by older generations, which shows them an alternative way of being a scholar. That alternative university project is grounded in the integrality of missions, where research, teaching, and CE are interconnected. For instance, Alonso, a full-time professor in the field of STEM education (engaged scholar, public university), created what he describes as a "virtuous circle" connecting teaching, research, and CE. However, Alonso thinks his colleagues perceive him as "lazy" because he relies on students' work and he is not always in his office.

Others have been successful in influencing and promoting institutional reform, changing specific aspects of the promotion reward systems, or serving as models for other colleagues. For instance, Pedro, a full-time professor in the field of social sciences (engaged scholar, public university), claims his department at the beginning did not validate his engaged work with indigenous peoples in the south of Chile. In recent years, however, he claims that a new generation of scholars has entered the university with a better understanding of his work, and thanks to them, the university now uses his work as a model for CE policy and the accreditation report.

Discussion

Findings suggest that engaged and nonengaged scholars in Chile reaffirm the idea that CE has no clear space in the world-class university. On the contrary, it is perceived as an optional work, which neither produces harm if conducted in scholars' free time nor benefits research or publications. Lack of time or resources, which in the literature is perceived as *barriers* to CE (Dougnac Quintana, 2018; Johnson, 2020; Nkhoma, 2015), appears as *symptoms* of a lack of legitimacy. In other words, lack of time or resources is explained by the priority that research and publication have over other forms of academic work. This is reinforced by the promotion system and the perception of peers. Therefore, participants in this study show that engaged scholars in Chile are in a struggle to earn and maintain legitimacy.

Although this is a common situation, for instance, in the United States with the research university model (O'Meara, 2011, 2016), engaged scholars in Chile have some elements in their favor. Most importantly, the mandatory accreditation in CE and, secondarily, recent changes in government research grants appear as sources of a conditioned legitimacy. Then, it is expected from engaged scholars to efficiently respond to the accreditation requirements without interfering with the most important elements of the academic work that will allow the university to succeed in the global rankings. This reflects that, even if Chilean universities are embedded in a global isomorphism based on the world-class university, what Lee and Naidoo (2020) may consider local complicity, there are national-level structures that also work as national governance forces that impact engaged scholars' legitimacy.

That limited space is acknowledged and used by engaged scholars who develop agentic practices to operationalize, negotiate, or resist these institutional scripts. Those operationalizing seek a connection between developing CE projects and responding efficiently to accreditation indicators, operating along the lines of the university's managerial tools (division of labor and small grants). Negotiating engaged scholars seek a better status beyond being instrumental to accreditation, trying to convince their colleagues that their work is valid by expanding the sources of legitimacy to students, community, disciplinary trends, and research outcomes. Finally, those resisting rely on an alternative university project rooted primarily in the history of Latin American universities and *extensión universitaria*; they do not just try to convince that their academic work is valid but that it exists. In sum, all engaged scholars must navigate the lack of legitimacy, with a diverse range of acceptance of the conditioned legitimacy and different levels of success.

These findings offer nuances and multiple reasons behind the high level of participation and importance of CE for scholars in Chile (Alarcón & Brunner, 2024). Behind that perceived consensus are different understandings of the contribution of CE to their scholarship. Those negotiating spend their time justifying that CE has more value than just reporting to the accreditation. They endure the lack of support at the cost of their well-being. In my research, I found scholars who not only valued CE work but also experienced frustration from different levels of tiredness, burnout, or even people being fired. All this frustration is on top of the regular stress and labor malaise of scholars in Chile (Soto & Fardella, 2019).

Similarly to what has been identified in the leadership of universities and institutions (Labraña et al., 2023; Salazar Alvarado, 2022), there is a persistence of the Latin American university model. This is a distinctive element of resisting engaged scholars that allows them to connect their CE work with a broader discussion of university projects. Alongside or against the world-class university, they identify an alternative symbolic force that comes from their history; a role the university had in the past, taken away from the dictatorship and the subsequent privatizing policies in higher education. As González López claimed, there is a "surviving practice" (González López, 2018) that is transmitted informally from mentors to mentees and in collective spaces. This represents a distinction from the "silent activism" of other scholars (Fardella et al., 2022) because these engaged scholars are not just *thinking* about alternatives to the world-class university; they *practice* another way of understanding academic work and carry the hopes of a change in the role of the university. This agentic practice is found in both the public university and the private university, in which engaged scholars draw from a long history of Chilean universities that, in the past, gave more importance to CE.

Compared with other countries in the region that share the same tradition of the Latin American university project (Cano Menoni & Flores, 2023; Flores et al., 2023), the Chilean case exemplifies the possibilities and limitations of CE accreditation systems. While other Latin American countries may institutionalize specific CE programs or leave the CE work to the autonomy of some universities, the Chilean accreditation system seems to offer a conditioned legitimacy to all institutions. That space is utilized by engaged scholars who are invited to develop a wide range of practices that contribute to disciplinary debates, teaching, learning, and research. This effort, however, should ignite a new conversation on how to integrate CE into the institution's core, not as something in the margins, an office, or an area of accreditation. In contrast, from the scholars' perspective, academic work is just one coherent and interconnected practice.

Conclusion

Although CE has no specific space within the world-class university, as far as it privileges research and publications, while CE work should be conducted in scholars' free time as an optional academic endeavor, this study provides evidence of other forces in play. Alongside the world-class university, which operates as a governance force and generates a global isomorphism (Benner, 2020; Meyer et al., 2007), the Chilean national accreditation system and research grants create a conditioned legitimacy for CE. Findings suggest engaged scholars in Chile live in a contradictory situation where universities value their work, but within a predefined limit. Therefore, there is a struggle to earn and maintain legitimacy through three agentic practices (Gonzales, 2014, 2015): operationalizing, negotiating, and resisting.

This study on CE, which emphasizes one of the multiple sociohistorical dynamics of universities, allows for a more complex understanding of the underlying tensions within the institution. What is usually described as barriers to engaged scholars is actually rooted in broader global forces, connecting their work to tensions in the overarching dispute over university projects, such as the world-class university and its alternatives. The key conundrum observed in the experience of engaged scholars in Chile is whether CE is just instrumental in obtaining accreditation, image, and reputation or is a legitimate component of knowledge production. Hence, it becomes an issue that is not solved by only promoting management optimization and efficiency, which might help achieve accreditation, but does not grant legitimacy to CE as an academic work.

The Chilean case is important because struggles experienced by operationalizing, negotiating, and resisting engaged scholars may resonate with other contexts, and the conceptualization may help them understand their experiences and identify new tensions.

CE work in Chile, particularly when rooted in Latin American traditions, may offer alternative models of scholarship that challenge hegemonic models. What is most valuable is that these challenges are not expressed through silent activism, rhetoric, or abstract ideas; CE is a practice that may serve as an example and model already in place. More research is needed to observe those practices and learn from the engaged scholars' experience, particularly in cases in the Global South that have been developing CE work for centuries under other labels, based on alternative university models. These studies may contribute a unique angle to the process of reimagining higher education beyond the limits of the world-class university.

For policymakers and university leadership, this study underscores the need to be fully aware of how CE can contribute not only to teaching and learning but also to research and publications. They should expect that national policies, such as the Chilean mandatory accreditation, open a window for engaged scholars to develop projects, but at the same time, they may clash with other forces governing the higher education and scientific system. There is also a need to value and acknowledge the force of social memory stemming from the tradition of the Latin American university, whose valuable contributions are not necessarily reflected in the global rankings. That alternative model could serve as a response to the growing frustrations and burnouts derived from the publish-or-perish model. Acknowledging this, however, may require an epistemic shift—a rupture with the idea that Global North models are inherently superior. Then, CE, particularly in the Global South, can inspire new understandings of university excellence.

Future research is needed to explore some threads identified in this study. Among them are the impact of resisting engaged scholars on CE institutionalization processes; the informal socialization of older generations of engaged and nonengaged scholars and the social memory of *extensión universitaria*; comparison of the Latin American tradition of CE with other cases of the Global South; the analysis of managerial tools such as the division of labor, performance-based contracts, and the tenure-track and promotion systems; the incorporation of CE as a requirement in government-funded research grants; and the emergence of disciplinary trends that incorporate CE.

While Chile is experiencing a national reform on CE and authorities, such as the undersecretary of higher education, can see a movement of scholars and staff, it is still not clear the breadth of this process and whether this movement will bring legitimacy. Based on the experience of Chilean engaged scholars in Santiago, this study suggests that there are unresolved tensions with other institutional expectations. The outcomes of these agentic practices at the institutional and national levels are still developing but may inspire new scenarios for universities worldwide.

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