As a kid, Gary Orfield read avidly about civil rights, a subject that seemed distant from his hometown of Minneapolis, which had few people of color in those days. When he was an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota in the early 1960s, university officials came to him with an unexpected request. “They asked me to figure out how to kind of orient and bring into college the American Indian students who were coming to our campus,” Orfield recalled. He didn’t know anything about American Indian students, though, other than that northern Minnesota had Indian reservations. So he organized a visit to those reservations, and eventually organized more trips for students to do projects. Those visits made a lasting impression on Orfield: “It made me realize how deep racism was, and how devastating it was.”

His interest in fighting racial injustice led Orfield to seek a career of research and action as a political scientist. While in graduate school at the University of Chicago, he started going to school board meetings, and he eventually wrote a dissertation on the efforts to desegregate education and equalize opportunities in the South.
Over the five decades since then, Orfield has worked to make access to a high-quality education equal for all students. His research has explored a range of hotly contested means to that end: busing, school choice, No Child Left Behind, affirmative action, diversity, and fair housing. Orfield’s research, as well as his understanding of politics and the educational system, landed him on commissions and in the expert witness box. Today he co-directs UCLA’s Civil Rights Project, and his work is central to ongoing debates about the desegregation of school systems and to the Supreme Court’s decisions on affirmative action in higher education.

Economist Teresa Ghilarducci never expected to be a policy entrepreneur. Her academic work and technical expertise in the obscure details of pensions landed her on many public and private pension and health care boards during a conventional academic career. However, now she finds herself promoting her idea for a new retirement plan for American workers to policymakers and the media. “My identity was always as an academic bringing ideas to a mountain, to Congress,” she explains. “What made me a policy entrepreneur is Rush Limbaugh and the right wing, when they started attacking me for being a communist.”

Her third book put her on Limbaugh’s radar. *When I’m Sixty-Four: The Plot against Pensions and the Plan to Save Them* laid out the plan for the Guaranteed Retirement Accounts (GRA) program. Workers would put 5% of their salary into their GRA, and they would get a tax credit of $600 (for example) to help pay for it. A public agency would manage the funds and guarantee a 2–4% return on savings after inflation, creating a new source of retirement income to add to Social Security. Limbaugh labeled this idea as socialist, but the *New York Times* recognized the GRA as one of the most innovative ideas of 2008. Today her idea is catching on
with state legislators, as Ghilarducci explains to them about the crisis in retirement plans and how her GRA idea can make the lives of millions of older Americans more secure.

Historian Stephanie Coontz confesses that her transformation from scholar to public intellectual was largely accidental. Her first book took thirteen years to write and was as academic as it sounds: *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families*. “I was so concerned to prove myself to other academics that I wrote this ponderous book that often overwhelmed my storyline with data just to prove I had it and never used a dime word if I could dig a dollar one out of my pocket!” she laughingly admits now. By the time she finished the book, she noticed there was a new need for her knowledge: “I could take the research I had done and use it to counteract some of the myths that I was hearing, mostly from conservatives but also from liberals, about the past of the family.”

Then she got lucky. In 1992, Coontz published a book on families for a popular audience called *The Way We Never Were*. Just as it came out, then vice president Dan Quayle ignited a raging public debate on “family values.” Quayle criticized Murphy Brown, a fictional TV character played by Candice Bergen, for deciding to become a single mother, or as Quayle put it, “mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice.”

The public uproar over family values might have been bad for society, Coontz points out, but it was timely for her, and she and her book publicists were ready: “That transformed me into the go-to person about whether it was really true that if we lived like the 1950s, we’d be better off.”

Lisa D. Moore’s best friend was diagnosed with AIDS in the 1980s, about the time she entered UC Berkeley’s public health doctoral program. The HIV epidemic got more personal, and
Moore’s commitment to research on HIV prevention intensified. For a course project, she studied San Francisco’s Prevention Point, one of the nation’s first needle exchange programs. In an act of civil disobedience, a group of anarchists, drug users, and other activists had set up the illegal program to reduce HIV transmission by allowing injection drug users to trade used needles for clean ones. Moore had to convince the anarchists that a researcher had something to contribute to the cause. Her study eventually demonstrated the value of Prevention Point and the commitment of the drug users in the program to preventing HIV.

After her course was over, Moore continued to work with the group to educate skeptical local policymakers and the African American community about the need to adopt a legal, better-funded program. Would this program work? Would it increase drug use? Moore’s role was to translate findings from her own research and that of other scholars to show that needle exchange programs could reduce HIV transmission without exacerbating drug use. A few years later, the city decided to fund the program, and it eventually became legal.

The work Moore did with needle exchanges after that first study was central to her development as a teacher, scholar, and community activist. She began to view drug users as agents in their own lives and, as she puts it, “to see how they are actively in their own way trying to make things better.” Having such street knowledge is important when her scholarly role gives her a privileged position in policy discussions. “No people in policy debates are poor street-based drug users,” Moore points out. “But that’s why it’s important to have some representation of what [street-based drug users] need.”

I’ve been lucky to encounter these four very different scholars—call them public intellectuals, scholar activists, “pracademics,” or
engaged scholars—either in person or on the page. Their stories line up with my own trajectory as an academic: seeing an injustice, studying that problem, wanting to make a difference, injecting scholarship into important public debates, taking advantage of good timing, being willing to handle disagreement, and enjoying the engagement with policymakers, activists, and the public outside of the university. We’ve learned more about the worlds we study as our engagement has taken us into unfamiliar settings and brought us unexpected challenges.

I will never forget the first time I testified before Congress. The impressive looking invitation that I received from a congressional committee chair included a polite but firm request that oral testimony be limited to five minutes. A little box on the witness table flashes green, yellow, and red lights to give committee witnesses a familiar reminder when their time is almost up.

Reducing years of detailed economic research into five minutes of respectfully persuasive and informative content was a daunting task. Looking up into the eyes of distinguished lawmakers as I spoke the words that I had rehearsed made the work worthwhile, though. The opportunity to speak directly to them was both a great privilege and a daunting responsibility that I had been eagerly seeking for fifteen years.

One of my earliest research studies convincingly (in my view) debunked the myth of gay affluence. Opponents of gay civil rights laws routinely point to the allegedly privileged economic position of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people to argue they don’t need legal protections against discrimination. My research shows that view is wrong—they are not a high-earning elite, and gay and bisexual men actually earn less than similarly qualified heterosexual men. Discrimination characterizes gay workers’ experiences, not privilege.
The moment I read my first statistical printouts with these findings I was ready to speak this new truth to our nation’s lawmakers. For a long time, though, I watched from the sidelines as advocates on one side skillfully used the worst economic stereotypes of gay people, while advocates on the other side did little to counter them. How could I directly transmit my important knowledge to powerful decision makers, who surely just needed to hear the facts so they could pass the right policy?

Once the first call finally came, I learned more about how I got there. I started to see how other scholars might get to the point of speaking truth to power—or speaking the truth to empower—just as Orfield, Ghilarducci, Coontz, and Moore have.

My job for more than two decades has been to be an economics and public policy professor, so I’ve had an insider’s view of how professors see our role, which rarely extends beyond academia. As scholars, we live and die (professionally, anyway) through our capacity to reason and persuade our colleagues. We have professional norms and customs to guide our research. We have our students to take our wisdom and insights from the classroom into the “real world.” University evaluation procedures keep us on a professionally productive path of research and publications. We get rewards of status, sabbaticals, and raises for staying professionally active. All of these features of academic life focus our attention on one key audience—ourselves.

And that all works for us, at least until the day comes that we want someone outside of our academic worlds to listen to us because we know something important:

- We’ve discovered some new problem that no one has been paying much attention to.
• We see an injustice that can be righted.
• We’ve got a good idea for how to address or even solve some social problem.
• We hear about a policymaker or public figure who’s just gotten a fact or judgment terribly wrong.
• We think a public debate is missing the point on some issue of the day.
• We’ve got good advice for individuals about how to improve their mental health, physical well-being, or economic status.

I have many smart colleagues who’ve got something to teach the world outside the university but don’t know the answer to a key question: How do we get policymakers, the media, and community members to pay attention to us?

It’s not just our own personal sense of social usefulness or professional pride that’s at stake here. We live in an era of declining public support for higher education and increasing public doubts about the value of scientific knowledge. If we can grab the public’s attention and make research relevant and accessible, we might increase their enthusiasm for supporting public higher education.

Most of us are ourselves products of the publicly supported higher education system, so we have even more of a responsibility to connect knowledge to the public interest. Many of us borrowed money, got parental support, or received public funding that put us through college and graduate school. I would argue that we have our own debt to society to pay.

The good news is that paying that debt back by sharing our knowledge with the broader world is also personally and professionally rewarding. It’s not just about feeling useful, since we can learn much more about the world we study when we play a
broader part in it. Many other professors have gotten new research questions, new perspectives, new ideas, new sources of data, and occasionally even new funding opportunities by interacting with the broader public. That can all add up to better research as well as even more engagement.

The bad news? There really isn’t any, but figuring out how to be effective in public discussions as academics requires a little more knowledge, some commitment of time, and a few additional skills. Most of us aren’t equipped to move from dissertation writer to public intellectual or publicly engaged scholar without learning about how to do that.

Sure, you can probably name a scholar in your field whose academic work attracted the attention of some powerful person who pulled that professor out of scholarly obscurity and into a prominent public position. But my educated guess is that in 99% of those situations, that academic overnight sensation had already developed both a personal network that included important people and a set of communication skills that set him or her up for success and influence. Academics don’t end up on NPR or the PBS NewsHour, at the White House, or in front of lawmakers by accident or blind luck.

Making a difference by engaging in the public conversation or debate about the issues that your work addresses isn’t a matter of stumbling onto fame and fortune—it’s a matter of being effective and strategic, and this book is designed to help you develop the strategy and skills you need.

My own road to the congressional witness chair began with the education in policymaking that I got as a student activist in high school and college, working on local politicians’ campaigns and other causes. I decided to get a Ph.D. in economics so that I could
better understand and influence policies that addressed problems like discrimination and unemployment. As a graduate student, I got practice by using my writing and analytical skills in campus debates about graduate student unions, affirmative action in education, and equal access to faculty jobs for women and people of color.

With a completed dissertation in hand, my first job at a school of public policy in the Washington, D.C., area opened up new types of engagement and expanded my personal network of people who are professionally engaged in the policy process. Policymakers, lawyers, community groups, employers, and others involved in the political process who learned about my research encouraged me to weigh in with an “expert’s” view on employment discrimination in the open hearings in state legislatures and other contexts.

I eventually learned that congressional hearings have not only more gravitas, but also a carefully choreographed lineup of witnesses, determined mostly by the majority party. Unlike more open processes in state legislatures, for Congress it’s “No invitation, no in-person testimony.” When the time came for me, the real invitation was not in a letter, but in the phone call from a committee staffer to vet me for my availability, accessibility, and appropriateness. That staffer in turn, had tapped into his network, speaking with knowledgeable insiders, advocacy organization staffs, and other experts to come up with my name as someone who could provide useful testimony.

Of course, the academic research and analysis that I had conducted over many years clearly had something to do with the invitation. Equally important was the other work I have done to create and feed that professional network that extends beyond my fellow
academics and includes the people making decisions about hearing witnesses.

Over the last two decades, I’ve answered reporters’ phone calls, consulted with attorneys and policymakers’ staffs, followed up on businesses’ requests for information, written op-eds, attended community meetings, talked with activists, listened to the arguments of participants in debates, provided memos and briefings to different stakeholders, provided summaries of academic work on different topics, been an expert witness in court cases, participated in webinars, submitted blog posts, tweeted study findings, and cranked out scores of policy reports. I’ve participated in the development of two think tanks to build an institutional publication and communications capacity on sexual orientation– and gender identity–related public policy issues. Those activities weren’t a means to an end—they have been much more important in my own engaged life than the more glamorous congressional hearing.

If I were starting this work today, I suspect that new social media would take up a bigger chunk of space on that list of activities. Even as someone with a rather old-fashioned attachment to direct face-to-face interaction, I’ve promoted a book with a Facebook page, participated in online book chats, taught an online course, built a small Twitter following, guest blogged on several sites, and published online essays. These new media opportunities have enhanced the power of my networks for getting my research findings into the hands of people who need them—a power that I will have you tapping into later on, too.

Certainly my level of involvement in the policy process puts me on the extremely active end of the engagement spectrum, but I’ve seen many valuable public contributions by academics who are less intensively involved, too. Every day I hear about
research produced by my colleagues that has the as-yet untapped potential to improve the world. Many of them want to bridge the gap between their work and the “real world” but don’t know how to begin:

- senior colleagues who’ve reached a point in their careers that gives them the knowledge and opportunity to reach out beyond academia but who don’t know how to connect to policy debates;
- young scholars fresh out of Ph.D. programs and eager to change the world who’ve come face-to-face with the more urgent demand to publish or perish;
- media-savvy colleagues who still find it hard to actively influence public debates;
- mid-career friends who are ready to engage but don’t see how they could find time in busy career and family schedules to develop influence;
- idealistic graduate students who went back to school to enhance their ability to contribute to social change but are disillusioned by the culture and incentive systems in academic life.

How can we make meaningful and influential connections in community and policy work? To answer that question, I have talked with my colleagues at UMass Amherst and at UCLA’s Williams Institute, one of the think tanks I worked to develop, along with other influential scholars. I’ve tried to “reverse engineer” our own lives and career paths to identify what we have learned that would help our colleagues, post-docs, and graduate students get where we are more quickly. This book flows primarily from those experiences and conversations, along with a few lessons from relevant research.
My goal in this book is to provide tools and knowledge to help you, a new or experienced scholar, connect your research and ideas with people and institutions outside of the academy in order to influence a situation that matters to you.

In my experience and from my observations of influential academics like the ones I’ve introduced in this chapter, three pieces are essential for making that happen: understanding the big picture, learning to communicate with new audiences, and building a broad network. This book pulls those three elements apart to understand why each is important and to provide practical suggestions for how to accomplish each goal.

**Box 1.1. Examples of How to Use Research to Make a Difference**

- Team up with a social movement or community organization to design a research project
- Evaluate an existing approach to addressing a problem
- Talk to a journalist about the public relevance of new research you’ve published
- Present research findings at hearings of city councils, state legislatures, or Congress
- Tweet about the lessons from research that apply to an issue in the headlines
- Write an op-ed about a problem that needs to be thought of in a different way
- Speak to a local organization about research (yours and others) and how it might apply to the organization’s work
- Write a letter to an agency head to let them know about recent research that is related to the agency’s mission
- Brief a policymaker about a problem that they can do something about
- Serve on a board or commission for an organization or policy-making body
1. See the big picture: the terms of the debate and the rules of the game. Behind almost any meaningful issue is a public conversation that involves some disagreement. Understanding the whole debate, discussed in chapter 2, helps you find an effective entry point on an issue via your own research and ideas. You’ll also see what else you need to know, since we often need to explain the big picture, not just our own relatively narrow slice of knowledge. Connecting knowledge to change also means understanding the rules of the game in relevant decision-making contexts outlined in chapter 3, such as legislatures or courts, and who the influential actors in the public debate are.

2. Build a network of relationships that extends into the work and institutions you hope to influence. The old adage for finding a job works here, too: It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. And you need to be proactive to build that network. Chapter 3 provides the first step in this process: identifying the players in the larger web of action on your issue so that you can strategically build your own network. Chapter 4 discusses how to build a rich professional network that extends well beyond academia to include journalists, policymakers and their staffs, community organizations, or others who provide the connections you’ll need. Once your network understands how your knowledge and research matters in the context they work in, those individuals take your ideas into important places that you can’t go.

3. You need to know how to communicate ideas to people who aren’t in your field. Anyone who has tried to explain their research to a nonacademic friend or relative discovers how comfortable we are with our disciplinary shorthand and how hard it is to push beyond that. Those of us who are teachers already
work with an audience outside of our field—our students. We can also learn to use new genres that appeal to a wider range of audiences through blogs, tweets, newspapers, radio shows, or briefing papers. Chapters 5–7 provide nuts-and-bolts tips on how to communicate effectively in many different contexts.

But effective communication involves more than communicating clearly at an appropriate level in new formats. Debates take place on many levels, sometimes seemingly rational and academic sounding, but more often involving “frames” that tap into emotions and deeply rooted ways of seeing the world that people are not always aware of. Being persuasive and influential in that context means understanding and making the most of—or maybe even challenging—the dominant frames on an issue. Chapter 5 starts the discussion of communication with some general lessons about messages, talking points, and framing. Chapters 6 and 7 provide more detailed advice on using traditional media and new social media to get your knowledge into the world.

The last two chapters address additional challenges. Every now and then a scholar will find herself in the middle of an uncomfortably hot debate that gets personal. Chapter 8 addresses ways of preventing and dealing with those heated moments. The common challenge that all of us face, though, is how to make time for public engagement in an already busy life. Chapter 9 offers some strategies for managing time and for getting around the false trade-off of engagement vs. research time. Engagement can enhance your teaching and research and can even help you get tenure and promotion with some planning.

No matter what form your engagement takes, the big three points will provide a strong base for engaging in the public conversation. You could read this as a how-to guide for fruitful en-
gagement as a scholar if you’re just starting down that path. For researchers who have already started down the road, the book offers a chance to find some new places and ways to engage more effectively.

The form that engagement takes and the goals you pursue are up to you. You might want to position yourself to speak as an “expert” who has knowledge relevant for decision makers in some policy context. You might work intensively for many years with a local organization that wants to better understand the roots of a community problem through research. You might also become a scholar-activist, working for a cause that is related to the subject of your research. You might even become a public intellectual, creating a well-read blog, amassing Twitter followers, or being asked to speak up in public contexts on different issues of the day, whether directly connected to your own research or some larger intellectual issues. No matter which direction you want to go, this book will help you lay out a path to use your research to change the world.

**A Call to Scholarly Engagement**

The world faces grave problems: disruptive climate change, persistent social and economic inequality, ongoing armed conflicts, threats to democracy, and infrastructure meltdowns, among others. These global problems have parallels and impacts at the national, state, and local levels in the United States. In the face of these daunting global and local challenges and in the context of our own busy careers, it’s tempting to keep our heads in our books and computers, hoping that our students and published ideas will trickle down from the ivory tower into the world to make a difference.
I believe that giving in to that temptation would be a lost opportunity and an abdication of our social responsibility.

In 2014, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof made a similar plea: “Professors, we need you!” He claimed that most academics “just don’t matter in today’s great debates” and called on us to change our “culture of exclusivity.” Kristof’s column upset many scholars, who pushed back, pointing out that many professors engage on public matters through their blogs, outreach to policymakers, and teaching. Conversations about public sociology and public anthropology, for example, show that many scholars value public engagement. But these academics also pointed out their heavy workloads, the lack of support for engagement, and the decline of tenure-track jobs, all of which make public involvement difficult.

I sympathize with both sides. While I acknowledge the existence of those challenges, I also think that more of us can become actively engaged, and most importantly, we can all become more effective in ways that improve—not threaten—our teaching, research, and professional reputations. Thomas Piketty’s breakthrough work on income inequality, Cornel West’s insights into racial justice, and Elizabeth Warren’s path from the classroom to the Senate all show us that scholars can engage and can make an impact, and you’ll meet more scholars like them in this book.

I’m not arguing that scholars have all the answers and deserve the world’s undivided attention and allegiance. We don’t. In a democracy, our elected representatives, fellow voters, and professional academics will discuss problems, debate solutions, and make decisions based on a political process, not the dictates of an intelligentsia and their applications of reason and rationality. In academia, we will continue to study and debate our findings, methods, and theories in intricate detail and in our own scholarly
lingo. But surely we have *something* useful to contribute to public discussions and debates about social, cultural, economic, scientific, and political issues, big and small.

“Decisions must be made,” Gary Orfield wisely notes, “so the question becomes whether intellectuals should engage in presenting the best available evidence or should simply abstain, letting obviously important decisions be made on the basis of prejudice or anecdote. My choice has been to be engaged.”

Engagement is also not a matter of left vs. right. The stereotype about liberal professors has some basis in fact. I’m certainly one of them. But effective public engagement on important issues is not limited to one point or another of the political spectrum. In fact, I’ve gotten a lot of great ideas about engagement by studying the practices of conservative scholars and think tanks.

Our public debates benefit from having many different viewpoints represented. As academics, we should be role models for passionate but thoughtful debates, using facts and complex ideas instead of sound bites. We can model agreeing to disagree without being disagreeable, as the saying goes. Teresa Ghilarducci points to scholars’ biggest assets in the public realm: “Our public engagement effectiveness comes from trust that comes from good research. . . . We have students, and we have an expectation that we know both sides.”

Your work can matter, and you can be influential at a public level. But the path to becoming a public professor, influential policy advisor, scholar-activist, valued community resource, or go-to person on an issue is not one that we’re trained to walk as scholars. Using this book to repurpose what you already know about how the world works plus acquiring a few new skills will position you for *engagement*—being involved and hoping to make a difference—and for *impact*—actually making a difference.
Box 1.2. Five Easy Ways to Get Started

1. Send a letter to the editor of a newspaper in response to an article related to your research
2. Post articles and tweet comments related to your research area on Facebook and Twitter
3. Write a press release for your next academic publication
4. Contact your university news office to get on their list of faculty experts
5. Find opportunities to meet your state representatives and member of Congress