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Oceanographers as Masons

Earlier this spring, Eileen Hofmann (Old Dominion University) and I were asked by the Consortium for Ocean Leadership to participate in the drafting of a consensus statement regarding the critical role of ocean sciences in responding to climate change. The European Marine Board and Ocean Leadership are partners in the development of this statement, which will be delivered at the fifth European Marine Board Forum next October at the European Parliament. The statement is intended to “highlight the key role of the ocean in climate regulation and climate change, as well as the impacts of climate change in the marine environment and associated socioeconomic consequences; emphasize the key role of marine science in guiding the societal response to climate change; and identify and communicate the key research priorities in the scope of ocean and climate which should be supported.” A tall task, particularly for those of us trained as research oceanographers.

In contemplating the daunting expectations of this consensus statement, I was reminded of a February 2015 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by Andrew J. Hoffman, Professor and Director of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan, that my colleague Amy Bower (Wood Hole Oceanographic Institution) forwarded to me earlier this year. In his article, “Isolated Scholars: Making Bricks, Not Shaping Policy,” Hoffman makes the case that the academic community is filled with “brick makers”—researchers who aim to and are rewarded for producing bricks of knowledge, but who are either uninterested in or ill equipped for the masonry that would turn those bricks into a coherent structure. Essentially, he argues that universities and research institutions are filled with too many bricklayers and too few masons.

I am sympathetic to the view that researchers, whether at universities or research institutions, are by and large rewarded almost exclusively for academic scholarship, and that the measure of that scholarship can at times bear a fair resemblance to the process of making bricks. Increasingly, however, there is a call for public scholarship, whereby university research is focused on the critical issues that face society in the twenty-first century. It is hard to imagine a more critical issue facing society today than climate change, and hard to imagine a more important field in the study of climate change than oceanography. But are oceanographers active participants in the discussions, debates, and arguments about climate change?

Advocates for public scholarship argue that conducting research relevant to the public’s interest meets only half of our obligation as scientists. Engaging with the public on this

scholarship brings the full measure. Indeed, Hoffman makes the case that “academics have a duty to make themselves heard in the public and political spheres, inserting their voices into debates where expert knowledge can move the conversation forward.” Thankfully, we are saved from cacophony by the reluctance of some scientists to heed that call to duty, or, perhaps more accurately stated, by their doubt that such public engagement *is* their duty.

Yet, surely we all agree that we need oceanographers engaged in public discussions of topics such as climate change, the health of coastal ecosystems, sea level rise, and marine geohazards. Equally, we can agree that not all oceanographers are required to take part in this engagement: ocean research should remain a valued pursuit in its own right. We recognize this duality in our professional ranks, but it is largely ignored in our graduate programs. Twenty years ago, the concept of interdisciplinary scholarship was suspect, yet today it is heralded as the hallmark of ocean science research. Graduate programs in oceanography have largely embraced, or at least no longer repel, this advance. However, would the idea that graduate programs in oceanography add supplementary training in public scholarship be embraced or met with suspicion by today’s oceanography faculty?

In this column over the past two years, Mark Abbott has written often and eloquently about the need to rethink graduate education in oceanography. In his last article as TOS President, he made the case that we could expand and diversify the value of our research to a larger community by working together on graduate education. Specifically, he proposed that “our oceanographic institutions could forge new partnerships that would share specialized courses and facilities, thus increasing the choices available to our students and preparing them for career paths outside academia and government.” I second Mark’s appeal for working across institutions to expand the value of our research to the public, but I would like to further suggest that we can best prepare our students for careers outside and *inside* academia and government by providing an education in academic *and* public scholarship. To give the public the whole picture of what oceanography has to offer, we need brick makers, and we need masons. Shouldn’t we be training them both?



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