Transcript
Matters of Engagement podcast
Episode: "Transformative Public Engagement: Pitfalls, Possibilities and Promise - keynote by Dr. Jamila Michener"
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SPEAKERS
Jennifer Johannesen, Emily Nicholas Angl, Jamila Michener

Jennifer 00:02
You're listening to Matters of Engagement, a podcast examining issues at the intersection of health, health care and society. I'm Jennifer Johannesen.

Emily 00:12
And I'm Emily Nicholas Angl.

Jennifer 00:16
Hey everyone, this is Jennifer. On September 22 of this year, the Public Engagement in Health Policy Project team at McMaster University hosted a one-day conference called Reimagining Public Engagement in a Changing World. Emily and I had the pleasure of attending. And a real highlight of the conference was the keynote delivered by Dr. Jamila Michener. She's an Associate Professor of Government and Public Policy at Cornell University. The audio recording we were given is unfortunately a little fuzzy. But it was such a great talk, we're going to play it here in its entirety anyway.

Emily 00:51
Dr. Michener presented in person with some slides so there may be a couple of spots where watching the video may be helpful to see what Dr. Michener is referring to. There's also about a minute or so where the sound drops out. And we've cut out the silence, but just note there's a small continuity blip. There's a link in the show notes to the video. Okay, the presentation is titled "Transformative Public Engagement: Pitfalls, Possibilities and Promise". Here's Dr. Michener.

Jamila 01:21
I'm excited to be here this morning. Of all the things that I could be asked to talk about, I think that public engagement is the thing that I am most passionate about. And so I'm really excited that I got asked to talk about that today. You know, I have said for years to any of my colleagues that would listen, I am not interested in university administration, I don't want to be in an administrative position. It's not my thing. And part of the reason I've said that is because I knew - this was certainly the case before I got tenure and I knew it would continue to be the case, and would be even more so the case after I got tenure - but where I wanted to focus my research, and my energy outside of research and teaching was in public engagement, not university administration. And so of course, what happened to me shortly after I got tenure, is that I was asked to take on a new inaugural role as an Associate Dean of Public Engagement.

Jamila 02:17

So it's like, I know, "you say you don't want to do this, but we're combining it with the thing you're really into... what do you think?" And, and so I've been in that role for a little under a year now. And the upside is that it makes my job thinking about how we can, in a university context as scholars, engage, through our research, through our teaching at times, and through our own sort of other activities. And so I've been spending a lot of time thinking about this. And I've been trying at Cornell to build infrastructure to make it possible for folks to do it. And one of the things that always is on my mind, is thinking about what it means to ethically engage, and to engage for the right reasons and in the right ways.

Jamila 03:10

So I want to talk about some of those things today. And I want to try to think about, with you, what it means to aim for, because ultimately, what we want is transformative public engagement. We don't want public engagement for the sake of it. Or so we can say we did it. So we have nice stories we can write up in the campus newspaper. We don't even want it so that people are impressed with the university or so that donors are excited and want to get more money. It's not bad if those things happen. But those things aren't the point. The point is to change the world. And it's interesting - sometimes I say that and I can feel my colleagues cringe because deep in our hearts, we don't actually believe that that's what we can do here in institutions like this. But that's the point. That's why we're engaging. And how do we make possible that transformative public engagement in the context of a variety of pitfalls? Because there's promise there, but there's also peril.

Jamila 04:14

And I want to sort of talk through with you all - consider this me thinking out loud - how I've navigated and how I still struggle with some of those pitfalls and perils. But also I struggle to see the promise of public engagement manifest. And you'll see that the slides are essentially just pictures so that you have things to distract you from looking at me.

Jamila 04:39

I want to actually start with myself because one of the cases that I will make to you is that we have to recognize where we are positioned in the process of public engagement, as researchers and as people who work in institutions like this and the university context, who want to engage the public, whatever that means to us in an our context, and also want to engage with government, policymakers, with community - we have to first understand ourselves, think about and acknowledge our own positioning, and understand what that might mean for our engagement, how it might affect the way we understand engagement, how it might affect who comes to mind when we think about who ought to be engaged, whose voices ought to be included. We all have things that we're attuned to, because of our experiences and our positions in the world.

Jamila 05:38

And we all have things that are obscure to us for those same reasons. And interrogating that, being clear on that, from the beginning, is an important first step in what I think of as ethical and transformative public engagement. So I thought it was important to model that by starting the talk with my giving you a sense of who I am, right? It's probably not totally astonishing for me to say to you, that I identify as a black woman, because that's what it probably looks like from the audience. But it's worth noting explicitly, because it's part of how I

understand who I am. And it shapes how I understand not only my place in the world, but the work that I want to do in the world. It matters that I grew up in New York City. In Brooklyn, this is the neighborhood. This is describing the neighborhood in Brooklyn that I lived in, in the 1980s. In 1989, when I lived there.

Jamila 06:36
It was one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in New York City. The New York Post, which is admittedly hyperbolic but in this case wasn't being, called it the killing ground, because there was a murder there every 63 hours. And several of those murders happened the last year that I lived in that neighborhood. I remember I was in third grade. I flunked out pretty much of third grade for reasons that perhaps aren't clear, there was a lot going on. One of the people murdered was an eight year old boy just like me just a few blocks away from where I lived. I knew him, I remember going to his funeral. And what growing up as a young girl, racialized as black, with immigrant parents in low income and working class communities in Brooklyn and Queens that were high crime, violent and challenging places to live. What it did for me, was it raised questions. I always wondered, why is it like this here? I would watch shows on TV and think "it doesn't seem like everyone else is living the way we're living". I would go to other places and visit... I had an aunt who moved to New Jersey and lived in suburban New Jersey.

Jamila 07:59
And the first time I went to her house, I was just like, This is how other people live. Why do we live like this? Is there something wrong with us? Or is there something else going on? My mom even had a letter that I wrote to the mayor of New York City, David Dinkins, the first black mayor of New York City, when I was in eighth grade the same year, that I lived in that neighborhood, talking about drugs in my neighborhood and offering and asking how I could help change it. So my context, the context that I grew up in sensitized me towards looking around me and thinking about change. And also sensitized me towards folks who are on the margins, who are vulnerable, who are suffering, in particular, low income, black communities. And I've always had a sense that things didn't have to be the way they were, and that it was possible for them to be different.

Jamila 08:56
When I got to college, I read a lot of James Baldwin [fades - missing approx 1 min of audio]....and how public policy shapes and structures the power that they have in the world, but also how they can exercise power, their own power to change the conditions that they're living with.

Jamila 09:11
So that's a bit about me, and how I orient myself. Here's some examples of my work. And I show this to you, just to show you that I'm pretty singularly obsessed with a core set of questions that has to do with power, especially for folks at the margins. And I think about this in terms of politics and democracy. I'm a political scientist by training. Along the way, in doing this work, I've realized that it lends itself to working with many people outside of academia. You know, this isn't something that I was ever encouraged to do or told to do. It's only mildly incentivized, at least at Cornell somewhat incentivized, but it's not a huge part of what's going to get you tenure or advance your career.

Jamila 10:05

So I have an optional thing that's like, Oh, that's nice. But at some point, I realized, given the kind of research I'm doing, I don't just want it sitting in journals or sitting on the shelf. I want it out there in the world, potentially helping to make change. And at first, I thought about that through what I would call a narrow dissemination model. I produce the research and then I disseminate it out there to all of the people who I can inform, who can gain knowledge through my research, and they will take it and go to something magical with it, who knows what. But my job is to disseminate it to get it out there. And so early on, I mostly focused on media, writing op eds in various newspaper journals and blogs and such. And that was a, it's fine, it's fine to do. And it was also in my comfort zone. Because I know how to write, especially how to write about my research.

Jamila 11:01
But early on, when I wrote my book, which was about a large public health insurance in the US context called Medicaid, that is for largely low income Americans, and disproportionately serves like Latina X and indigenous Americans. When I wrote that book, I wrote a couple of, you know, op eds, and newspapers thinking, I'm gonna disseminate knowledge about this work and the Washington Post, New York Times. And advocacy organization started to reach out to me and say, Oh, we're gonna read your book and read your work. But we want to know how we can use this to build power among Medicaid beneficiaries, the people that you're writing with the people that feature so centrally in your book. And I was like, huh, wow, these folks actually want to talk to me, they want to work with me. I was excited about it.

Jamila 11:52
I remember telling a colleague, one of the first times this happened pretty early on for me, that an advocacy organization had invited me to sort of speak at one of their events, and also to sort of sit and talk and brainstorm with them about the work they were doing. And my colleagues said, are they paying you? I hadn't thought about that. And, no, they've been paying for my plane ticket, but they're not paying me. Well, just don't do too much of that stuff. Because you don't have tenure yet. And you need to really focus on the research. But I went, and I found it was incredible. I found it was incredible. I actually got a chance to sync with people who are in the world trying to affect change. And there were things I could share with them from my research that they found helpful. But there was probably more I would admit that they shared with me from their work that opened my eyes that made me want to go ask new and different questions that made me think differently about how I would collect data conduct research going forward.

Jamila 12:50
One of those early organizations that I had conversations like that with was called Kentucky Voices for Health. And I stayed in touch with them over the years. I went back actually several times and spoke at that meeting that they have every year and engage them. And the project that Katherine (Boothe) mentioned when she was introducing me, where I'm working with state government and advocates and... they are the ones all of these years later, who helped facilitate the connections for that. And so by having a long term relationship with them that at the beginning, I really wasn't sure what it was - but that I leaned into because I thought I want my work to make a difference - really mattered. And there are a bunch of other organizations, some grassroots, some national. URO (Ultimate Reentry Opportunity) is an organization that focuses on reentry for people who are returning from prison. It's in my local community.

Jamila 13:41

And I've been on their data development team for years. We just help them figure out what do they need to know to do their work better, and then we help them get that information. And then we help them bring it to the state legislature, and in particular our focus is on getting systematic qualitative information from people who are reentering in our community, incorporating them deeply into the process, so that we can figure out what it is that they need. We, a few years ago, about two and a half years ago, did in depth interviews with about a little under 60 people in our community who within the last three years had returned from prison or jail and were trying to reintegrate into the community. And we sat down with them for an hour, often more, often two - they had a lot to say - and really tried to catalogue and understand their experiences. We paid them for their time. We let them know what we were doing and why we were doing it. And we offered them any resources and services we could about needs that came up in the course of our conversation.

Jamila 14:48

We gave them all the space we could possibly give them. We didn't ask a bunch of super constrained questions. We left space open for them to truly tell us about their experiences and many of us who had been engaged in those interviews had already been involved in the community. And so people recognized and trusted and knew us. And we got so much critical information, we took that information - and I worked with URO - and we've been writing a series of reports to highlight the primary challenges that people reentering from prison or jail are facing in our community. And what we found was that housing was the one of the main things that people were struggling with.

Jamila 15:32

Landlords run background checks. And it turns out that if you have a criminal record, they don't want to give you housing. And folks just end up in impossible situations, either on the street, or living in places that are unsafe, living in places that if they have, for example, substance use disorders, are going to put them in compromising positions where they could potentially relapse. And these create conditions for recidivism, where you end up back in prison or jail. We thought this has emerged as the number one issue, we really need to address it. And we worked with the folks who are experiencing this, who identified this issue for us with the community organization that organized and mobilized and advocated on their behalf with URO and with our local legislature.

Jamila 16:29

We pulled in some other organizations in the community that don't normally do this work, but they do work around housing. And some of my students who had engaged in this and have actually helped with the interviews and helped with analyzing the interview data and help with producing the reports. Together, we presented to our local county legislature, and we made a case for building housing specifically to meet the needs of this population. To my - I'll be frank - astonishment, our county was responsive to this. And just last year, Sunflower Houses opened, which is a housing complex where in the community I live in that is specifically meant to provide a space for people who are returning from jail and prison. A space that is safe, a space that is supportive, a space that supports their healing and well being and a space that they themselves can play a role in constructing and reconstructing dynamically so that it can meet their needs.

Jamila 17:34

And my students who are involved in this were like, we can't believe this actually happened. We can't believe what started two and a half, three years ago as what felt like a research project where we're interviewing people, actually contributed to what feels like changing the world. Now Cornell loved this because there was a big article in the paper about it, it's like, "look at all the good work that the institution does". That doesn't... sorry for anybody at Cornell who doesn't like me to say this... matter to me. That's great, right? But what matters is that people have opportunities to live with dignity that they didn't have before. But this project took years. And there were many times, to be honest, that I dreaded taking it on. Because it started off as something that was sort of a class, I was using my students in the class con-... not using, but working with my students in a class context... a group of students, a small group of students in a larger class really wanted to do this.

Jamila 18:34

And it just took a lot of work to train them. You can't just send people out into a community and let them loose on it. That can do harm. So the training, the oversight, the accountability, the constant communication with the members of the community, the groups and the people that we were working with, who had the most at stake. The self accountability to make sure we weren't like "we're the researchers we know what to do, we're gonna go in here, and we're gonna tell you..." There was so much work, and there were points where I was like, "why am I doing that I already have a full time job". But then, of course, it leads to these outcomes. That reinforced to me the promise of public engagement.

Jamila 19:18

But the process always makes me think about the perils. Because there there were so many points in that process where we could have easily just sort of done what we thought was best, and we would have been wrong. If not for the constant connection with communication with and commitment to being responsive to and to allowing to lead members of our community who in fact, often know exactly what they need and what needs to be done.

Jamila 19:50

And to submit to that and say, "You know what, I might be the expert in some ways, but I'm not the expert when it comes to to this community to your experiences, to what needs to be done." And to figure out how to bring together all these different actors and play our role - no more, no less - in supporting change. It was certainly trial and error. There were many errors along the way. But this just gives you a sense of the kind of engagement work that I do. I also do what I think of as more traditional engagement work where I'm working with federal or state, or local governments. So I hate this picture but it's the only one I can find... This is me testifying at a congressional hearing in, I don't know, maybe this is March, talking about universal health care.

Jamila 20:34

The thing that's interesting about this is that I've noticed it's the thing that people are most excited about. Like, I did this because they asked me to. But it was such a big deal to so many people at the time. And to be frank, it's not to say that it didn't matter. To be frank, I thought, all this stuff that I'm doing in the community on a day to day basis, much of it which nobody knows about or pays attention to, is so much more important to me than the congressional testimony. I mean, I'll do that too, right? But...and I'm grateful for the opportunities, I've had to

work with state governments to work with folks in Congress. And when those opportunities emerge, if they make sense, I will take advantage of them. Right? So public engagement is more than one thing. And we have to engage a wide set of actors. And we have to think strategically about which actors to engage under what conditions.

Jamila 21:28

But I will say I often push back against what I find is a sort of almost instinctive response for people to be really drawn to and impressed by and attentive to engagement that involves policy elites. People high up in legislatures or in government or what have you, that can be our model for what we really think will create change. And we can tend to pay less attention to engagement that's really nitty gritty, on the ground in people's lives and in communities. I try to cover both ends of that. And there's lots in the middle. But clearly, it's a lot, right? It's a lot.

Jamila 22:11

So I wanted to think through a few things with you all here for the remaining minutes I have. What is the point of all of this? Is it to make me feel good? Like I'm accomplishing something? I mean, that's one thing that can emerge from it. Although as I've already admitted, I don't always feel good. Often I'm like, why am I doing all of this? I could just be showing up at work, teaching my students doing some research, going home like everybody else does. Instead of answering emails on the weekend, testifying at hearings. I'm texting with the folks in my community, I work... I don't know how many people have my cell phone number. It's wild. And there are many times when actually, it does not make me feel good.

Jamila 22:52

And I am constantly questioning. I'm so tired. Why am I doing this? It's good for my quality of life? And so what is the point? What is the point? I thought it was important to explicitly state for me - this is different for each of us - but I think this is a question we all have to ask, what are the values underlying our public engagement work? Mindless public engagement for the sake of it, or because we got some resources that allow us to do it? Or because an opportunity popped up so we may as well?

Jamila 23:20

Without a real commitment to a set of principles that motivate and ultimately motivate that public engagement and ultimately act as criteria by which we can judge ourselves and hold ourselves accountable, and by which other people can do the same. That is necessary, or at least consistent engagement. Right? If you're doing a one off thing because you did this project, and you had an opportunity, and you're just doing it, and you don't plan on doing this again, you don't plan on doing it consistently, you don't plan on building long term relationships with your partners in government or in community... then maybe values aren't so important.

Jamila 24:01

Long term systematic engagement requires a basis and a set of values. And for me, three core values are equity, dignity, and democracy. Maybe democracy because I'm a political scientist. But I also think it's genuinely important in the context of at least putatively democratic societies. It's part of what motivates my engagement or my commitment to public engagement is the notion that everyone ought to have a voice. And not just in the

minimalist sense that: one person one vote, you get to vote in an election. But in the maximalist sense. There are processes that are determining who gets what. That are structuring the shape of communities. And are shaping outcomes in people's lives. And as many people as possible ought to be able to influence those processes. I think that is a democratic ideal. And especially the people who are most profoundly affected by them. Democracy means those folks should have a voice. And public engagement is a way to make that happen. Right?

Jamila 25:15

Dignity is important as well. It means that we can't just try to give a voice to the voiceless - and that is not a phrase I subscribe to. Why are they voiceless? Let's focus on that, which let's get that changed. As opposed to giving them a voice through us through our voice. So I think that the idea of giving a voice to the voiceless is wrongheaded. But we can decide that we care about voice, that we want to incorporate center people's voices, especially people that have the most at stake. And if we're not attentive to the importance of their dignity, we can do it in ways that are extractive, in ways that are exploititative, in ways that are tokenistic. "Oh yep, come show up, Sit here. Voice! We got it. Someone with lived experience is in the room. Check!"

Jamila 26:07

We haven't thought about how they show up in the room. We haven't thought about how we make space for them. We haven't thought about their own experiences. With indignities often, for many people, especially people at the economic and racial margin - those experiences are constant. We haven't thought about how we have to change our ways of being and acting to accommodate the dignity of the very people that we want to engage with - not just accommodate, but prioritize, center.

Jamila 26:37

And then of course, equity. So public engagement doesn't have to be equity enhancing. It does not have to. I can engage economic elites and leaders whose goals don't have anything to do with equity or democracy or dignity. And I can say "look, engagement! I worked with these policy leaders and we worked together and here's the outcome that came from that". Well, who benefits? That's what the equity question is about. And not just on the surface, and not just in terms of our intentions. But in reality, who benefits? Do we even know? Have we even measured it? Have we thought from the beginning about how our processes will lead to outcomes that benefit some more than others.

Jamila 27:29

And sometimes we want some to be benefited more than others, right? I mean, equity is not treating everyone the same. It's treating people as appropriate, given their positions and their structural positions and contexts. But what we don't want to do is perpetuate inequities and imbalances that are unfair. And that can very easily happen even through the sort of good intentions of folks who want to engage publicly. So I think of these as core values. But of course, there's what I want: equity, dignity, democracy, that's what I want public engagement to take us towards...those are the values that motivates my focus on public engagement. But there is a gap between that and reality. This is the reality gap. There's what I think I want and what I want to do and what my intentions are... to be clear, we're not always even sure about that. There are plenty of folks that come to me and they're like, I want to do this public engagement thing. What do you think? And I say, Well, why do

you want to do it? And it's crickets, you have no idea why you want to do it, you just thought it would be a good idea. Seems cool. Maybe it'll get you some attention. It'll make you feel who knows you have no idea. So often, I'm like, go back to the drawing board.

Jamila 28:48

First, figure out why you're doing this, then come back to me before we talk about what to do. So it's not to say even that this desire piece is always clear. We don't always know what we want, and why we want it from public engagement. But once... let's assume if you're in this room, it's required and you're here because you do know what you want, and why you want it right. And now this is what we have to contend with: the reality gap. The distance between what it is we want - our ideals or norms or values, [muffled]? And that's the part of this I've struggled with the most.

Jamila 29:22

So I want to talk about just a few reasons for this reality gap. One is when we neglect power, the role of power and the dynamics of power. The other is when our motives and our incentives are misaligned. A third is when we either lack real investment, or our investment is misdirected. It's going in the wrong directions towards the wrong people and places. And finally, when we have a myopic vision. So I'm going to start with that last piece and work my way through and I promise it won't take long. Myopic vision.

Jamila 29:58

[referring to a slide] I didn't realize this was in the Bible. But I think it's an interesting one.

Jamila 30:04

It's really important to have a vision that is capacious when it comes to public engagement. In part, what that means is when we think about who are going to engage, what counts as engagement, what it looks like and how to make it happen. Now, sometimes we think really narrowly, we're thinking only about elite policymakers. We're thinking only about, in general, like the easiest people to get to who have the loudest voices that are easiest to identify. To really get deep into communities, especially communities that have otherwise been oppressed, is quite challenging. There may be language barriers, there may be quote, unquote, cultural barriers. And certainly, there are all manner of biases that we may not even know that we have. Right? I see this all the time, especially when I'm working closely with communities.

Jamila 31:10

And it is so interesting that whomever in a particular community... so I found this: I do a lot of work with people who are incarcerated. And someone who's incarcerated and who went to college in prison - I have actually an amazing student. I do teaching in prison. Cornell has a prison education program. And I've worked with that program for a long time now, I'm Board Chair of the program now. And I teach in prison. - And one of my students who spent 17 and a half years in prison, he got out. He was... I taught him while he was in prison. He was a brilliant student. He wrote a New York Times article, it's not a secret. His name is Darnell [muffled]. He was a brilliant student. I remember reading the first paper he wrote and thinking, oh my gosh, to have this person behind bars, what a tragedy What a waste of brilliance. And the nicest person and the most brilliantly articulate person. And the gentlest person, even though he's like 6'6". So people maybe don't think gentle when

at first when they see him, but he opens up his mouth and starts talking to you and starts engaging you and you just feel the warmth, and the brilliance, and it's easy to be comfortable with him. And eventually he was released.

Jamila 32:28
He actually came to Cornell after his release to continue his studies because he'd already been taking Cornell classes while he was incarcerated. He was able to get into Cornell. I was his advisor, he got his degree from Cornell. He's now in his second year at Yale Law School. And we're great friends, he's somebody who I cherish. But when folks want the voice of an incarcerated person, they love Darnell. He is so palatable, especially now that he has a Cornell degree and he is at Yale Law School, and he has published in the New York Times. And it's not to say that his voice doesn't matter, because indeed, the circumstances he grew up in and that led him to prison are very different than where he is now. And we ought to hear his voice.

Jamila 33:17
But the tendency to turn to the person who is closest to you, in some way, has some set of traits that are familiar or comfortable to you. And for that person to be a spokesperson who represents the whole. And in that way, to sort of homogenize communities and pick representatives that most aligned with what we understand a good leader or good representative to look like, right? But somebody who is speaking working English, whose grammar isn't perfect, who doesn't have much education per our standards... those are the people that we can exclude without realizing we're doing it, without knowing it, right? Or somebody who is saying things that just don't fit into our understanding of what's possible in the world.

Jamila 34:10
I've been doing some work recently, [muffled] organizations all over the country, but in particular, I'm working very closely with one in upstate New York where I live. And people are talking about things like de-commodifying housing and disrupting capitalism, so on and so forth. And it's not that those are things I don't support, but there's a part of me that I have to turn off. That's like, no, that doesn't, no this isn't the direction to go. Like, this is not feasible. This is not politicall... to really stop myself. Wait a minute, I don't get to decide what the agenda is, or what part of it is feasible or not. Right? So we can, whether we know it or not, have a myopic vision of who we ought to be talking to, of what kind of change ought to happen, and of what the process for that change should look like. "Oh, let's start with the least conflictual route. If we can cooperate and coordinate, that's always preferable."

Jamila 35:08
Is it? Sometimes not. Sometimes you see people spin all their wheels and waste all their energy going through these institutional processes of cooperation and coordination. And by the time they get to the end of it, they're done for. And they wanted to start coming out of the gate, saying, no, let's fight, because what is happening now is not right. And instead, it's like, no, no, no, no. Lower your voice. Change your tone. Go through the process that we have already established for you. And when you've done that, and it's drained every ounce of your energy and motivation, if you still feel like fighting, then I guess we can have a conflict. Right?

Jamila 35:50

And we can have this narrow vision dictating how and under what conditions people should be engaging. And so vision is something that we always want to keep in mind. What do we invest in? Who do we invest in? I think this is important. I've worked with a few foundations. And they're like, you know, [we don't want to be] giving our money to like wealthy - or not, well - elite academics to study the problems. We want to start giving that money to folks on the ground doing the work. I'm like, great. And I was a part of working with the foundation where they were trying to kind of develop a program to direct their resources differently. And it really took work.

Jamila 36:33

What's the application going to look like? Is it going to be a written application that requires you to write a narrative? Because that's not how everybody engages. Can people make a video? Can they make a tiktok? Like, what are the... how can we change what we consider our standards, so that we can invest differently in communities and people and places that might not be good investments, by the way. The ROI, the return on investment, might actually be really low. Because there's a lot more work to be done. And there are a lot more barriers to overcome. Are you willing to change your ideas about what your return on investment might be? About the timeline for that return? Oh, you need results in 18 months, you need a report in 18 months? In communities that have faced entrenched oppression, for generation...? Rethinking how you direct your investments and what you expect out of them.

Jamila 37:36

And then there's incentives and motivations. In the context of the university and academia, I've already talked about how sometimes we can have the wrong motivations. And we're not particularly incentivized to do this work and do it well. You don't get credit for having integrity in how you engage people and communities. You get credit for having that article in the campus newspaper, that's like, "Look, you testified in the legislature". But not for the day-in day-out work. Not when people from the community are texting you and saying, "Are you going to be at the meeting tonight?" and you're like, "I'm so tired, I've got papers to grade". The supports in terms of teaching, resources, and also the credit, the rewards, those are misaligned.

Jamila 38:25

Part of what I've been working at my own university to do, is to have us think differently about how public engagement factors into the tenure process. Because right now, many people think of it as something you do after tenure, because you just can't afford to do it before. And in fact, I had a colleague that said "all the stuff you're doing in prison, I mean, be careful that you don't put too much time into it and end up not getting tenure". And it was it was an absolute honest and important point that my colleague made to me and I appreciated it. But it points to how our incentive structure in the academic context is misaligned. And often, when we do get resources for public engagement, those resources are from a particular donor that wants something.

Jamila 39:06

Now, we might tell themselves, that's not going to shape our decisions. But unless we're really intentional, and there are mechanisms of accountability, we can end up tailoring our public engagement to wealthy donors.

That's crazy. Those are not the people this is for. They may be the people paying for it and I'm happy to take their money, but it's not for them. And when I talk to donors - my university is strategic about how often they let this happen and for good reason - I will tell them: I'll take your money but it's not for you. So you will not get to dictate what happens. The people this is for will.

Jamila 39:50

And then finally there's power. And this is a good note for us to wrap on. Power matters. Voice without power is tokenism. And sometimes we want the voices - we want the voices, we're like, yes, let's bring people to the table with lived experience. Let's bring people from the community. Where are they sitting at the table? Who else is at the table? What are the rules, structuring who gets to have a say in influence at the table? Are they just at the table and they look good sitting there? But there's no real path between sitting at that table and influencing the process. And often, we don't do that intentionally. But we only take the first step of getting people to the table. And we don't think once they get there, how are they going to affect any change? Given the structure of our institutions, we just expect them to slate into what's already been happening without actually changing it. That is voice without power. And it may matter for us. But it will not matter for the people who we believe we're giving that voice to - and voice isn't even something we should be able to give. It's just... I don't say empowering - so I have the power, and I'm giving it to you. So I'm empowering you - No. Building power. Power already exists. In even the most marginalized communities. But there are barriers to it being executed or exercised effectively.

Jamila 41:23

And we can help remove those barriers to sort of build that power. But we don't give anybody power. That's not the kind of thing power is. But when we neglect power dynamics, our own power - I feel comfortable getting up in front of this room and speaking and saying things to you all that maybe some of you don't like. Maybe some of you aren't comfortable. "What did you do to me, I'm done here, my job. I'm fine." Not everybody would, not everybody should. And how am I going to... How are we going to create flexible, adaptable enough institutions, that there are real mechanisms for people to influence the processes. Even people who don't have the benefits and advantages of the structural positioning that we have. I think that's really very important.

Jamila 42:15

So I want to end here, just by saying, you know, people say, Well, okay, what do we do with all this? It's a lot. Yeah, there's a lot. And there are no easy answers that I'm gonna wrap you up with, like: here are the top two things you can go home and do and everything will be okay. That's not the kind of work this is, you know? But I do think we can interrogate our assumptions, practices and processes. And part of what I've tried to do for you all today is surface the things I'm constantly interrogating, in hopes that all inspire you to the extent that you're not already and I trust that many of you are - to interrogate those things yourself. De- center, first of all, often ourselves, de-center the folks who have... who are powerful, who are advantaged ,who are the norm. De-center those folks. Who's always talking the most in the room? Whose suggestions carry through and actually lead to change? Whose ideas do we take seriously?

Jamila 43:09

Often we need to be decentering those people and figuring out who we can center instead, and transforming our vision if we want to change our impact. Thinking broadly, widely, more capaciously, about who should be involved, what we should be doing and how we should be doing it. And many of us in university contexts, we have expertise, we've been studying things for a long time, we understand a lot, we may understand how institutions work. And that is all important, we can bring that knowledge to the table. But we should also bring a humility to the table that recognizes that there's more we don't know than we do. And that there are people who look very different from us who are positioned very differently, who know a lot. And that we need to benefit from that knowledge. And so sometimes that means stepping back, stepping to the side. Often that's what it means. And changing our vision. Fundamentally changing what being willing to change what it is we think we're up to.

Jamila 44:20
When I started the project that... Well, I didn't start it, I worked with a group of people and we sort of did this, we did this together... But the project that ultimately led to the Sunflower Houses in my community being built? I did not start that with an emphasis on housing. I study social policy, health policy, and other social policies. And I wanted to understand how people who were returning from prison or jail were having a hard time accessing policy benefits. And that is really what I thought we were going to be getting out of these interviews and what I was looking for. But people were talking about: we'll get to... we have a series of things we're working on and that's on the list... but we decided to start with housing because people would say housing is the number one. Public housing is the number one. Gotta do something about housing. And we're interviewing people who are... who don't have anywhere to go after that interview.

Jamila 45:12
And so I had to change what I thought matter. It wasn't the thing I studied. It was something else, just being willing to recalibrate our vision so that we can have a greater impact. And I know that this raises more questions probably than it answers for you. And it's frustrating to hear about all these challenges, all the ways it's hard. But that's the work. That's the work. It's what we have to commit to. And it's what I'm excited to be engaged in with you all so I will end there. Thank you for listening as long as you have.

Jennifer 45:59
Matters of Engagement is written and produced by Jennifer Johannesen and Emily Nicholas Angl. If you have feedback, ideas, or just want to say hello, please get in touch through our website at mattersofengagement.com.

Jennifer 46:13
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