

2024

## Reimagining the Faculty Role in Community Engagement

Nadine Dolby  
*Purdue University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.indianastate.edu/jcehe>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Community-Based Learning Commons](#), [Community Psychology Commons](#), [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#), [Service Learning Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dolby, Nadine (2024) "Reimagining the Faculty Role in Community Engagement," *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education*: Vol. 14: Iss. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholars.indianastate.edu/jcehe/vol14/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Publications at Sycamore Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education by an authorized editor of Sycamore Scholars. For more information, please contact [dana.swinford@indstate.edu](mailto:dana.swinford@indstate.edu).

## Reimagining the Faculty Role in Community Engagement

*Nadine Dolby*  
*Purdue University*

### ABSTRACT

In this Forum commentary, I discuss my experience as a faculty member starting a community-based nonprofit organization, Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette. Since founding the organization in 2019, I have moved between the roles of faculty and organization president, finding ways to create new pedagogical spaces that lead to community-based social change. I suggest that establishing nonprofit organizations are one avenue for faculty community engagement to address social injustices and inequities.

*Keywords:* social change, nonprofit organizations, higher education, human-animal studies

The woman was parked in her car outside of my local animal shelter and she was crying. I had volunteered at the shelter for more than 10 years by the time I met her in the parking lot that hot July afternoon in 2018. I had helped thousands of animals that had passed through the shelter and had talked with thousands of people. Some of the conversations were happy and positive, as I often assisted with adoptions. But there were also more difficult and troubling conversations that accumulated over the years—with people who had to surrender their pets because they could no longer afford food, supplies, and veterinary fees; with people who could not afford the reclaim fees that were charged by the shelter, or the cost of the mandatory rabies vaccine; and with people who had no resources to care for an aging pet who was sick. As the years and the stories accumulated, I began to realize that animal shelters are sites of social injustice and inequity, and that pets are often separated from families who love them because of economic, social, and cultural forces (Guenther, 2020).

Through her tears, the woman told me that she had recently lost her housing and was living in her car. She knew that a car without air conditioning was no place for two big dogs on a boiling July day. With no options for

temporary or emergency shelter for them, she surrendered them to the shelter. Yet she could not leave the parking lot: She knew her family was inside. After we talked that day, I saw her in the parking lot every time I was there for the next few weeks, crying, staring, and grieving the loss of her family. That summer, I decided that I needed to move beyond volunteering at the shelter. I knew it was time to begin to take steps to address the systemic inequities in our community and beyond, and to make changes that would lead to greater equity and justice for both humans and animals.

As faculty and staff at colleges and universities, we are accustomed to partnering *with* organizations in the community. In this short Forum commentary, I discuss my experience from the perspective of a faculty member who started a community-based 501(c)(3) organization, Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette (AAGL). Since founding the organization in 2019, I have moved between the roles of faculty and organization president, finding ways to create new pedagogical spaces that lead to community-based social change. I discuss the initial development and growth of AAGL through the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and into the present moment. I then reflect on how I have negotiated my roles

as both a faculty member and an organization president, and the new possibilities that have been enabled. I provide a brief overview and guide for faculty who might also be interested in starting their own 501(c) organization. In conclusion, I suggest that establishing a nonprofit organization is one avenue for faculty community engagement to address social injustices and inequities.

### **Beginnings and Growth of a Community Organization**

In the weeks that followed my conversation in the parking lot of the animal shelter in 2018, I started the process of thinking about how to start a new organization. I drew on both my extensive experience with my community and my decades of experience as a researcher, most recently, in the fields of veterinary education, and animals and society (e.g., Dolby, 2019; 2022). As someone who had been intimately involved with the small world of shelters and rescues in my community, I knew that I needed to expand beyond those circles. I realized that many of these organizations cared deeply about animals, but often had negative perceptions of human owners (Guenther, 2020). I also knew that there were people in my community who could be excited about an organization that focused on animals as family (Dolby, 2022a) and the relationships between humans and animals, or the human-animal bond.

I started slowly, considering an appropriate name for the organization, finding a graphic designer to create a logo, and having conversations with local leaders in social and human services. I spent the first half of 2019 primarily listening and was ready to launch public meetings that summer. Those first meetings were full of reflections on the current problems with animal shelters in our local community, and excitement for change. I have come to think of these initial conversations more as focus groups, as most of the attendees did not sustain their involvement in the organization. Slowly, however, a core of volunteers developed. In September 2019, we

launched a series of humane education classes at local social service agencies, drawing on my decades of experience as a curriculum designer and classroom instructor.

The beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020 forced us out of classrooms and had us rethinking and reimagining the role of the organization. As lines at local food pantries stretched for miles, I constantly thought about people's pets: If they had no food for themselves, how could they feed their animals? What would happen to them? I knew our local shelter system could not support an influx of hundreds (if not thousands) of pets. By April, we had launched a series of pet food pantries that continued through 2020, distributing over 40,000 pounds of pet food. That spring and summer, managing pet food became an overwhelming responsibility as we eventually rented a storage area and coordinated supply and distribution. The need in our community was overwhelming, and our first pet food pantry lasted no more than 20 minutes as our supply was quickly exhausted. With extensive local media coverage, our community responded and donations poured in. I knew then that Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette had proven itself to be a needed, valued, and supported organization.

Over the next two years, we established ourselves as a 501(c)(3), built a website (<https://www.animaladvocatesgl.org>), and started a social media presence. We have a three-part mission of keeping pets out of shelters, keeping families together, and celebrating the human-animal bond. AAGL is committed to ensuring that people of all income levels and racial backgrounds can keep their families together, and that includes pets. Breed restrictions, insurance riders, discriminatory adoption policies at animal shelters (e.g., requiring a 6-foot fenced backyard to adopt a dog, or requiring that someone be home with the dog at all times), exorbitant reclaim fees, and inflexible policies at animal shelters: All of this contributes to a hidden world of injustice (Dickey, 2016; Guenther, 2020).

### **Negotiating Roles: Organization President and Professor**

As cases of COVID surged in the spring of 2020, I joined faculty throughout the world in transitioning to online, emergency teaching. That process was all-consuming during the first few weeks of the pandemic. At that point, my faculty role was paramount. I had little time to think about AAGL, though I saw the news and knew we needed to act. As the spring and summer of 2020 wore on, my focus shifted and AAGL became a full-time pursuit, with my faculty role temporarily fading. I spent most hours of my day answering emails and messages, picking up donations and delivering emergency pet food, keeping our storage area clean and organized, coordinating volunteers, overseeing pet food pantries, producing social media posts, writing press releases, and talking to the local media. Many of our volunteers were graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, and staff at my university. I started to create more professional, social, and organizational contacts in departments and units that I had not worked with previously. AAGL donated to the campus food pantry, multiple departments and units sponsored donation drives for us, and a social media class in our communications school assisted with our social media. I was also able to include AAGL in the content of a course I co-taught in the fall of 2020 titled “Companion Animals and the Human-Animal Bond.”

### **Starting a Nonprofit Organization as a Faculty Member<sup>1</sup>**

While it is impossible to provide a full account of my experience and my suggestions in this short essay, I will share highlights of what I have learned through this process over the past three years.

As a faculty member, the most vital component of starting a nonprofit organization is thinking through how the substantial time commitment can be blended (or not) with your

faculty role. Where are you on the tenure track? What does your college/university require for tenure/promotion? Are there ways in which you can meld your faculty responsibilities with your organization? Will your department/college/university be supportive of your efforts? In my case, I decided to wait until I had reached full professor and had a robust publication record. I have also maintained an active research agenda, separate from my work with AAGL. My department, college, and university have been supportive. I work at a land grant institution: Community outreach, service, and education are components of our mission. In 2021, I received a Jefferson Award for Public Service from my institution, in recognition of my founding and leadership of AAGL.

It is critical that your organization have a clear and distinct mission. AAGL is focused on my local community. I have lived here for 18 years and have been an active and involved community member. Nonprofits can be local, state, regional, national, or international in scope. Knowing your community, however you define it, is a significant factor before moving forward. You will need other people who are also committed to your organization, and willing (eventually) to be officers. Many, but not all, of the people involved in AAGL have connections to my institution as faculty, staff, students, and alumni.

When you are ready to begin the process of establishing the 501(c)(3), some useful resources to consult include the National Council of Nonprofits (<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/>) and Candid (<https://candid.org/>), which is a new organization formed through a partnership between the Foundation Center and GuideStar. The journal *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (Sage) is a useful leading academic journal in the field.

In my state of Indiana, we needed to register as a business entity and complete

<sup>1</sup> I am not a lawyer, and this section should not be considered legal advice. Nonprofits are legal entities, and it is always best to consult a legal professional. Space limitations also require that I condense details.

paperwork online as a first step. We were then able to apply to the Internal Revenue Service for incorporation as a 501(c)(3), which allows us to accept tax deductible donations. The filing fee for a 1023-EZ form (the one we used) is \$275 as of this writing. Our process of incorporation occurred at the height of the COVID pandemic, and thus took several months to complete. However, the IRS was extremely helpful through this process, and we had an officer assigned to us directly whom I spoke with on the phone on a few occasions. With the 501(c)(3) process completed, we opened a bank account (and eventually got a credit card for the organization), built a website (<https://www.animaladvocatesgl.org>), and ordered business cards and promotional materials for in-person outreach events. As a nonprofit organization, we are eligible for free accounts from Canva (Canva.com) that we use for social media, and Google Workspace. We pay for our website hosting and basic accounting software (ZipBooks).

### **New Avenues and Possibilities for Community Engagement**

I have come to understand my roles as organization president and faculty member as synergistic. My work has more significant impacts when I think of these roles as connected, rather than separate and isolated. Before I started AAGL, I drew on my volunteer experience in animal shelters in our community to create new courses and assignments at my university (Dolby, 2017), and to forge new research partnerships across campus (Dolby & Litster, 2015, 2019). I also served as the faculty advisor to a student organization focused on animal welfare. The students who started the organization were all volunteers or employees at the animal shelter where I volunteered, so our meetings often happened as we were working at the shelter. More than a decade later, I now think how I can bring elements of my work with AAGL to my varied campus responsibilities, from teaching to research, service, and engagement. For example, AAGL is currently beginning a

partnership with the College of Veterinary Medicine on an emergency fostering program to serve people in crisis who need a temporary safe place for their pets.

While challenging, starting a community organization is a pathway for faculty who are committed to exploring new forms of community engagement, and what Mitchell and Latta (2020) refer to as “futurity” referencing the writings of Goodyear-Ka’opua (2012). Mitchell and Latta focus on the rich and growing landscape of critical service learning, while my experience suggests another, complementary path. Because community organizations exist independent of university structures, they allow for freedom of experimentation and the opportunity to create new avenues of exploration for not only critique, but for building these futures.

### **REFERENCES**

- Dickey, B. (2016). *Pit bull: The battle over an American icon*. Vintage Books.
- Dolby, N. (2017). Experiential education in the honors classroom: Animals, society and education. *Honors in Practice, 13*, 71–88.
- Dolby, N. (2019). Nonhuman animals and the future of environmental education: Empathy and new possibilities. *Journal of Environmental Education, 50*(4-6), 403–415.
- Dolby, N. (2022). *Learning animals: Curriculum, pedagogy, and becoming a veterinarian*. Taylor & Francis, CRC Press.
- Dolby, N. (2022a). Multispecies families: Pets, community and social action. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 1–7*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10443894221094495>
- Dolby, N., & Litster, A. (2015). Understanding veterinarians as educators: An exploratory study. *Teaching in Higher Education, 20*(3), 272–284.

- Dolby, N., & Litster, A. (2019). Animal welfare and animal rights: An exploratory study of veterinary students' perspectives. *Society & Animals, 27*, 575–594.
- Goodyear-Ka'opua, N. (2012). Indigenous oceanic futures: Challenging settler colonialism and militarization. In T. Smith, E. Tuck, & K. W. Yang (Eds.), *Indigenous and decolonizing studies in education* (pp. 82–102). Routledge.
- Guenther, K. (2020). *The lives and deaths of shelter animals*. Stanford University Press.
- Mitchell, T., & Latta, M. (2020). From critical community service to critical service learning and the futures we must (still) imagine. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education, 12*(1), 3–6.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nadine Dolby is Professor of Education at Purdue University and president of Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette. She is a 2021 recipient of a Jefferson Award for Public Service. Her most recent book is *Learning Animals: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Becoming a Veterinarian* (CRC Press/ Routledge, 2022). She has published widely in the fields of animals and society, and multi-cultural/international education. [ndolby@purdue.edu](mailto:ndolby@purdue.edu)

#### AUTHOR NOTE

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nadine Dolby, 100 N. University Street, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. 47907. [ndolby@purdue.edu](mailto:ndolby@purdue.edu)