Reflections on a Scholarship of Practice

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ASHE Presidential Address

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Most higher education scholars believe that research is useful to policymakers and administrators. Many policymakers and administrators also share this belief. This belief finds expression in the typical implications for policy and practice section of articles appearing in the core journals of higher education. For example, John C. Smart, the editor of *Research in Higher Education*, created a special section titled "Research and Practice" for this core higher education journal.

This belief, however, frequently falls short of actual practice. To make the research and scholarship of our field more useful to practice, a scholarship of practice needs to emerge.

A delineation of the characteristics of professional practice in higher education is essential to the development of a scholarship of practice. Some characteristics of practice in higher education include the following:

1. "Professional practice" is an umbrella term, as practice contains many segments organized around different organizational roles and functions.[1]

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[1]Bucher and Strauss (1961) assert that professions consist of various segments loosely collected under an umbrella profession. For example, the profession of medicine is an umbrella profession for the specialties of surgery and internal medicine. I extend Bucher and Strauss's notion of segments to the case of professional practice in higher education.

Such roles include those of the president and the officers of chief academic affairs, chief student affairs, institutional advancement, and admissions. The academic work of faculty also constitutes a segment of professional practice.

2. "Problematic" best depicts the tasks of professional practice. Michael D. Cohen and James G. March's (1974) term "problematic technology" applies here. The relationship between policies, activities, processes and procedures, and intended results is uncertain. Put differently, the technology needed to achieve some results is unknown or uncertain.

3. "Uncertainty" describes much of professional practice in higher education. Administrators cope with some uncertainty by adopting management fads developed in schools of business administration. Robert Birnbaum (2000) ably describes this phenomenon in his book *Management Fads in Higher Education.*

4. The ill-structured nature of many problems faced in practice in higher education compounds its uncertain nature. Ill-structured problems are those without a fixed solution but which often generate multiple solutions with uncertain outcomes (Kitchener, 1986; Wood, 1983).

5. The vast majority of college and university administrators have not been trained to do their work. Previous work experience and the training they received in their academic discipline provide the basis for their work.

6. Previous experience and common sense, for the most part, shape the knowledge base of professional practice in higher education. This characteristic raises substantive questions about "how professional" administrative practice is in higher education. William J. Goode (1969) asserts that an abstract body of knowledge constitutes one of the core generating traits of professions. The current knowledge base of practice for most college and university administrators is not codified, nor is it abstract.

These characteristics of professional practice strongly suggest a need for the development of a scholarship of practice for higher education. A scholarship of practice would have two primary goals: (a) the improvement of administrative practice in higher education, and (b) the development of a knowledge base worthy of professional status for administrative work. Such a scholarship of practice requires four attributes. I outline each of these four attributes in the following paragraphs.

1. The forms of knowledge produced by higher education scholars engaged in the scholarship of application, discovery, and integration contribute to the development of a knowledge base to guide administrative, professional practice. One task of the scholarship of practice is to take such forms of knowledge and make them available and accessible to practitioners. Such is the first attribute of a scholarship of practice.

A crisper delineation of this attribute comes from an elaboration on the scholarships of application, discovery, integration and teaching delineated by Ernest Boyer (1990). The scholarship of application entails the applica-

tion of disciplinary knowledge and skill to address important societal problems. Boyer (1996) also called this the scholarship of engagement as academics engage their disciplinary knowledge and skill in service to the external environment. Higher education scholars whose work identifies significant social issues for higher education to address are engaged in the scholarship of application. Higher education scholars who point out through their research the effects of public policy are also engaged in the scholarship of application. Such research strives to assist the makers of public policy.

The scholarship of discovery seeks to acquire knowledge for its own sake and pursues new knowledge (Boyer, 1990). The development of theory also fits the category of the scholarship of discovery. Jerry Gaston (1971) asserts that the academic reward structure places a high value on the originality of research.

Boyer (1990) contended that the scholarship of integration strives to give meaning to isolated facts. It also entails fitting the findings of research into meaningful patterns. Thus, synthesis of knowledge in a field of study is what the scholarship of integration is about. The series *The Higher Education: A Handbook of Theory and Research,* edited by John C. Smart, routinely publishes the outcomes of the scholarship of integration.

In an effort to make sense of the "intellectual quagmire" of perspectives on the scholarship of teaching, William Luckey, Patricia Helland, and I define the scholarship of teaching as the development and improvement of pedagogical practice. We offer this definition in our ASHE-ERIC Higher Education report titled *Institutionalizing a Broader View of Scholarship Through Boyer's Four Domains* (Braxton, Luckey, & Helland, 2002).

Precious few higher education scholars seriously engage in the scholarship of teaching. Because college teaching constitutes a professional role for college and university faculty, the scholarship of teaching is also a specific form of the scholarship of practice.

2. The development of a knowledge base for professional practice requires a division of scholarly labor. The professoriate of higher education as a field of study, administrators in colleges and universities, graduate students in higher education as a field of study, faculty and graduate students in cognate academic disciplines, and institutional research officers are groups that can contribute. Also, researchers working in think-tanks, state-wide coordinating boards, and national higher education organizations such as the American Council on Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities are also able to contribute to a practice-oriented knowledge base.

3. Cognitive rationality functions as the underlying value pattern of the scholarship of practice (Parsons & Platt, 1968, 1973). It places a high value on the comprehension and solution of intellectual problems in rational terms (Platt, Parsons, & Kirshestein, 1976). In the case of the scholarship of prac-

tice, the value of cognitive rationality pertains to the value placed on the comprehension and solution of problems of practice in rational terms.

4. Professional practice requires several types of knowledge. A consideration of the different types of knowledge used in professional practice points the way to an agenda for the scholarship of practice. Michael Eraut (1988) identifies four modes of knowledge used in practice. These four modes are replicative, applicatory, interpretive, and associative. Replicative knowledge involves a knowledge of the many routines of professional practice. Applicatory knowledge pertains to the translation of technical knowledge into prescriptions for action. Interpretive knowledge is what we might call "wisdom and judgment" which enables the professional to make efficacious decisions. Associative knowledge involves indeterminate, intuitive modes of knowledge portrayed as guiding metaphors and images that invoke particular meanings.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND REFINEMENT
OF ERAUT'S MODES OF PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

A scholarship of practice of higher education should refine and develop replicative, applicatory, and interpretative forms of knowledge. Associative knowledge, however, seems more attainable through personal experience and interactions with others than through scholarship.

The development and refinement of replicative knowledge begins with an empirical delineation of "routines" for different forms of administrative practice. An empirical identification of such routines constitutes a first step in the development of replicative knowledge for professional practice. Once such routines are empirically delineated, then both empirical and integrative scholarship can be brought to bear on the development of a knowledge base to guide administrative performance of routine tasks. I acknowledge, of course, that some routines will not require a refined knowledge base. Experience will suffice for such tasks.

A scholarship of practice in higher education should also focus on the development and refinement of applicatory knowledge, as the applicatory knowledge entails the translation of technical knowledge into action. In many cases, such a translation requires reliable knowledge. By reliable knowledge, I mean obtaining the same research finding over several studies, as reliability refers to consistency in measurement of variables (Babbie, 2001; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Reliable knowledge results from replications.

What do we take as sufficient evidence of consistency in research findings? Psychologists in identifying "well established" treatments for psychosocial problems or disorders require that at least two, between-group design experiments must show that either the treatment outperforms the control

group or that the treatment outperforms or is equal to an already established treatment (Crits-Christoph, 1998; Task Force, 1995). It is reasonable to view reliable knowledge and well-established treatments as interchangeable. However, most aspects of professional practice defy study through experimental design with the random assignment of subjects to treatment and control groups.

We can, however, approach the rigor of control of such experiments through research studies that use multivariate statistical procedures to identify reliable knowledge about professional practice. I recommend a threshold of 10 or more multivariate tests involving an object of professional practice as the basis for determining reliability. If 7 out of 10 tests yield the same result, then reliable knowledge obtains. Put differently, 70 percent of 10 or more tests must yield affirming results to designate a finding as reliable knowledge. I recognize that some readers may prefer a different threshold of tests and percentage of consistent results or tests.

Although this standard applies to quantitative studies, a similar criterion could be applied to findings derived from qualitative studies. Basically, the replication of research initially conducted by others provides the basis for determining the reliability of findings.

I offer an illustration of reliable knowledge pertaining to the process of college student departure. Stephanie Lee and I (Braxton & Lee, in press) identify two forms of reliable knowledge about this process in residential colleges and universities. The first form of such reliable knowledge reads as follows: The greater the degree of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution. Reliable knowledge results because, out of the 19 tests performed, 16 of them generated affirmative results.

The other form of reliable knowledge pertains to the positive influence of subsequent institutional commitment on the likelihood of student persistence in college. Of the 13 tests conducted in this institutional setting, 11 affirm this relationship. Such reliable knowledge can be used as prescriptions for action—action in the form of the implementation of policies, programs, and activities.

The problem of college student departure constitutes one nettlesome problem of professional practice. Other domains of professional practice require reliable knowledge to guide action.

For example, professional practice sometimes requires a consideration of how organizations change. Applicatory knowledge about this change process might rest on reliable knowledge about the dynamics of the organizational change process.

In some cases, replicative knowledge also requires reliable knowledge. For example, faculty personnel decisions require replicative knowledge. Department chairpersons, deans, and chiefs of academic affairs frequently

use the results of student course ratings to inform decisions about annual salary increments, reappointment, promotion, and tenure. Better decisions would result from reliable knowledge about the validity of student course-rating instruments. Scholars of professional practice in higher education should focus their efforts on replicating studies that seek to determine the validity of student course rating instruments. Such studies reviewed by John A. Centra (1993) provide a good starting place for such replications.

Another routine of professional practice involves the making of faculty hiring decisions. Such decisions can be aided by reliable knowledge on the importance of the influence of past publication productivity on future publication productivity. Scholars of professional practice in higher education should replicate studies that focus on the influence of past publication productivity of faculty members on their current publication patterns.

A scholarship of practice of higher education might also contribute to the improvement and development of interpretative knowledge. Given that interpretative knowledge entails "wisdom and judgment" to make efficacious decisions, the scholarship of practice might focus on the identification of various perspectives on emerging issues of importance to administrators in higher education.

Reviews of literature from a variety of sources on topics of administrative interest can shape interpretative knowledge. For example, some colleges and universities are confronting the issue of posttenure review. The task of a scholar of practice in this case would be to identify the advantages and disadvantages of posttenure review. Such a scholar would also identify approaches to posttenure review. If possible, the scholar would make a recommendation for a particular approach. A review of pertinent literature from a variety of sources would be the basis for such scholarship. Through such scholarship on posttenure review, academic administrators would have knowledge derived from the scholarship of practice as a backdrop to their decision making. The ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report series offers a publication medium for the development of interpretative knowledge for professional practice in higher education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

These reflections on a scholarship of practice give rise to six implications for policy and practice in the field of higher education.

1. Higher education as a field of study needs to embrace and give legitimacy to the scholarship of practice. Our field should come to value the scholarship of practice as it values the scholarships of application, discovery, integration, and teaching.

2. The reward structures of departments that house higher education doctoral programs and their universities need to recognize the value of schol-

ars who contribute to the development of the scholarship of practice. In particular, scholars who engage in replications of research initiated by others need to have their work valued. Such replications would be conducted with a view toward establishing the reliability of knowledge about a particular topic.

3. The core academic journals of our fields should also encourage the submission of replications of research initiated by others. The "Research and Practice" section of *Research in Higher Education* offers a possible medium for replications aimed at the delineation of reliable knowledge. Other core publication outlets in our field should demonstrate an openness to the publication of contributions to the advancement of knowledge to guide professional practice in higher education.

4. The training of scholars of professional practice should become an integral part of the missions of doctoral programs in higher education as a field of study. Aspects of course work and questions on doctoral qualifying examinations should pertain to topics within the scholarship of practice. Doctoral students should also be encouraged, when appropriate, to select dissertation topics pertinent to the scholarship of practice.

5. A rethinking of the distinctions between the doctor of education (Ed.D). and the doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees should use the scholarship of practice as a *key* differentiating factor. Although the course work and dissertation involved in the study for the Ph.D. may contribute to the scholarship of practice, the curriculum of the Ed.D.should draw on the scholarship of practice. Doctor of education students should be trained to apply the knowledge base generated by the scholarship of practice to administrative work.

6. The scholarship of practice may lead to the development of textbooks on the various segments of professional practice in higher education. Textbooks in our field are extremely rare. As it currently stands, ASHE readers on particular topics, journal articles, book chapters, and books constitute the readings for courses in higher education programs.

Some Closing Reflections

Scholars of higher education and our doctoral preparation programs may come to engage in the scholarship of practice. However, until a doctorate in higher education becomes the primary qualification for various administrative roles and functions, the outcomes of the scholarship of practice may not realize their full potential for contributing to a knowledge base for professional practice in higher education.

A key and nettlesome problem remains: How can the scholarship of our field in general and the scholarship of practice in particular become the primary source of knowledge for administrators and policymakers not

trained in higher education doctoral programs? Scholars in our field should continue to engage in the scholarships of application, discovery, integration and teaching. However, our field should also come to encourage and recognize the scholarship of practice as a legitimate and important form of scholarship.

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