I Am a Scholar

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2024 ASHE Presidential Address

I Am a Scholar

Jeni Hart

Abstract: This Presidential Address considers what it means to be a higher education scholar and member of a scholarly community. By taking a longitudinal look at my career, I identify the neoliberal notions that align scholarly identity and worth with productivity and prestige. I confront systems and structures that minoritize scholars in myriad ways reproducing inequities that do not serve the espoused values of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. I conclude by arguing that the conceptualization of a scholar must be expanded to best address the critical challenges facing academe.

Keywords: scholar, scholarship, exclusionary practices, faculty career

At the 2023 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Annual Conference, and in the theme announcement for the 2024 conference, I shared what is now a portion of the introduction to this article to explicate how I came to, and identify with the theme, *I Am a Scholar*. I share it again because it helps to contextualize this article.

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As an early career scholar, I worked at a regional state university. I remember my first ASHE as an assistant professor. I introduced myself to colleagues who would ask where I worked. Upon sharing, many would dismiss me and walk away. Others were more subtle, but the message was the same: I did not have the "right" pedigree; I was not an important scholar–or maybe even a scholar at all. The following year, I moved to another university–a large research university that was a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU). What a difference a year made! I introduced myself to colleagues who again asked where I worked. People were interested in what I was bringing to ASHE and what I had to share with the community as a scholar. These experiences made me reflect on what it meant to be a scholar and who "earned" that status. Did I really become more scholarly in a year's time? These questions haunted me so much that I wanted to reflect upon them with the ASHE community, which brought me to the conference theme.

The intent of the 2024 conference theme, *I Am a Scholar*, was to not only consider our own identities as scholars, but to consider who we are as a scholarly community. Moreover, the theme was not about navel gazing, something for which many of us are unfairly critiqued in our work. Nor was it a way to give everyone a "participation" ribbon.

Being a scholar is an act of labor, resistance, connection, and knowledge generation. Further, this is a project to welcome and learn from a community of scholars from a variety of institution types, associations, policy settings, unique identities, geographies, methodologies, epistemologies, positions within and beyond academe, and myriad other locations. Collectively, we can stake our claim as scholars who continue to transform higher education through the work we do. Given the hostile climate toward higher education, particularly in the United States, including anti-diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) legislation in many states; questions about whether higher education, and particularly graduate education, is necessary; threats to free speech and academic freedom, in part under the guise of "institutional neutrality," our work remains essential and we have a responsibility to be accessible advocates for higher education as a public good.

We must also acknowledge the tension that exists between neoliberal ideas of scholarly production and what role an academic conference plays in this—and at the same time, we hope to create conferences beyond reporting findings that center on dialogue, exchanging ideas, learning from each other, and pushing ourselves to consider perspectives that may challenge our own.

Throughout this article, I will share stories of my own scholarly be(com)ing.[1] I will share multiple moments, such as the experience I shared at the

[1] "Be(com)ing: combination of the words 'being' and 'becoming' to represent the mutually constitutive processes of being and becoming. It acknowledges that we are fluid selves always already in relation with the changing world around us" (Carr, 2024, pp. 8, 13).

beginning of this article, when I questioned whether I could be, should be, or was a scholar. I do so to highlight the messages that persist in academe, in the field, and even in ASHE that leave many of us to question whether we belong and are worthy of the title of scholar. I also do so to critique the structures that we can work to change so that we can celebrate our scholarly identities without question.

You Are Not a Scholar: Student Affairs Educator

I entered my doctoral program after my master's degree and about a decade as a student affairs educator. I came to doctoral education, in part, because as a practitioner, I watched colleagues become frustrated, wanting their student affairs practice to be appreciated for what it was, as a complement, not a competition, to the academic mission. I found that many of my peers did not learn about power, faculty work, and agency in many master's programs at the time—and I wanted to be able to make a difference to the field by reshaping curriculum. And at that time, the message was clear: faculty were scholars and student affairs educators were not—so until I became a faculty member myself, I did not have the power to make a difference.

Those who work in higher education beyond the classroom, including in student affairs, make a difference in the lives of the students on our campuses, and in the lives of those doing this essential work. There is ample scholarship to support this (e.g., Astin, 1984; Hoyt, 2023; Kuh et al., 1991; Mayhew et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2022; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Experiences lived by practitioners unearth the questions with which we wrestle in practice and in theory. As examples, Jonathan Pryor (2017, 2020, 2021) identified two unique ways higher education professionals engaged in queer leadership, advancing Arianna Kezar and Jaime Lester's (2011) theory of grassroots leadership. Rosie Perez (2017) showed us through her longitudinal work with student affairs educators how their self-authorship shifts overtime. She found that validating voice matters, reminding us of the harm we cause in not acknowledging their contributions. Similarly, Jonathan McElderry and Stephanie Hernandez Rivera (2017) spoke to the harm institutional dynamics caused them in their roles as administrators, working with student activists fighting for racial justice. Their lived experiences must be held up as scholarly examples of what higher education is, could, and should be.

Emphasizing the important role of practitioners and policy makers in scholarship and challenging the idea of higher education research for research's sake, Jelena Brankovic and Brendan Cantwell (2022) argued that research in higher education contributes to knowledge in both epistemic and pragmatic ways. Scholars in the field should contribute to both the scientific community and that the field exists because of policy and practice. In this way, then, we are not only doing work for others to learn from (and eventu-

ally cite) but also engaging policy makers and practitioners to advance the work at the institutional level. Their knowledge is essential. Moreover, if we are not weaving together theory and practice (or theorists and practitioners), as D-L Stewart (2022) reminded us, our work does not matter.

Celebrating the scholarly contributions of student affairs educators and pushing for a more inclusive notion of scholar, Keith Edwards, Heather Shea, Glenn DeGuzman, Raechele Pope, Mamta Accapadi, and Susana Muñoz (2024) argued that podcasts led by student affairs educators are public scholarship. In their podcast, *Student Affairs Now*, the hosts and guests come together to create new knowledge for listeners. They have also published this translational education research in the *Journal of College Student Development*. Some may still argue that the journal article is "more scholarly" than the podcast, despite 120,000 downloads and 50,000 views on YouTube in the first 3 years of their podcast. The impact of the podcast, while not included in the all-important h-index, clearly demonstrates meaningful contributions to the field of higher education.

You Are Not a Scholar: Doctoral Student

When I entered my doctoral program, I was one of very few peers who was a fulltime student and interested in pursuing the professoriate. I had more time and access to the faculty in my program and probably more attention—perhaps this was because I was perceived to be on track to be a "scholar," or maybe I was just around much more than some of my peers could be. I recognize my privilege, including the ability to attend the University of Arizona and learn from some of the best scholars in the field. I am the scholar I am today because of them, including Sheila Slaughter, Scott Thomas, Doug Woodard, John Cheslock, and John Levin. My advisor and mentor was, and is, Gary Rhoades, to whom I owe much gratitude.

Yet, in a time dedicated to be(com)ing a scholar, I confronted feelings of being an imposter. I questioned whether I should walk away from my PhD program, whether I was good enough to get a faculty position, whether I would ever have an article accepted. To be clear, no one told me I was not good enough, but the feeling was very real. One day in class, I even asked Scott Thomas when I would stop feeling like an impostor, a fraud. He jokingly said, "never." But there is a bit of truth in that response; nearly 80% of people have experienced these feelings (Bravata et al., 2020).

Kevin Cokley, a counseling psychologist, is among the first to empirically understand imposter phenomenon, originally defined in 1978 as "an internal experience of intellectual phonies" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 1). Cokley's use of phenomenon (2024) is an intentional shift away from imposter syndrome, which pathologizes these feelings, and blames the individual, not the system

that creates it. Moreover, much like Second Wave Feminism, imposter syndrome is perceived as primarily a white woman's concern. Cokley argued that it is also a racialized phenomenon, that as a white woman, I do not experience the same way.

When you work as faculty in the United States, this does not come as a surprise. There are many scholars in our field who study the experiences of minoritized faculty whose findings continue to reinforce the systemic racism and misogynoir in academe (e.g., Bonner et al., 2014; Croom, 2017; Ferguson, et al., 2021; Garrett et al., 2023; Gonzales et al., 2013; Griffin, 2019; López, 2021; Shotton, et al., 2018). Triangulating decades of qualitative studies, Theodore Masters-Waage and colleagues (Masters-Waage et al., 2024) found different promotion and tenure outcomes for racially minoritized faculty compared to white faculty. Studying over 1,500 tenure and promotion cases from five universities, they found a double standard in how research metrics were evaluated, leading to minoritized faculty receiving 7% more negative votes at the college level and 44% fewer unanimous tenure and promotion decisions. Further, Women of Color were most likely to experience double standards related to research productivity. These findings continue to reinforce how academic systems breed racialized imposter phenomenon. In this way, Cokley (2024) is advancing the conversation in important ways that allow us to name and nuance experiences that threaten our identities as scholars.

You Are Not a Scholar: The Tenure Process

I am a tenure stream faculty member. I worked hard to create a portfolio that required the uncomfortable process of describing my accomplishments. And to be fair, I understood what was expected of me. To be considered a tenurable faculty member, I fed into the productivity combine to have "enough" single and first author publications in the "best" journals, grant activity, and conference presentations. I could also demonstrate that my teaching was "good enough" and that I sat on some committees. When I submitted my portfolio, I was confident that I met the bar for tenure at the University of Missouri (Mizzou).

The process at Mizzou, not unsimilar from many other institutions, required evaluation by my department, chair, college, dean, and university committee before it was sent to the provost and president. I progressed positively through the process until the university faculty committee. At that time, if anyone in the evaluation process had questions about the candidate's materials, a majority of an academic leader and/or the majority of a committee must vote no, which happened in my case. This was a strong signal that I was not considered a scholar or scholarly enough. I met with the university committee, accompanied by my chair, dean, and two full professors. The

committee asked very few questions of me, directing them to my chair and dean instead. Clearly, I was not the scholar in the room. Then, the line of questioning turned to the research methods I used in most of my work. This also cut to the core of my identity as a feminist, as there is a through line between my epistemological, theoretical, and methodological identities. I left the hearing exhausted, longing for the humanization of higher education that Joy Gaston Gayles (2023) argued for in her ASHE presidential address. Although I was successful and the university committee overturned their initial vote, the experience left a lasting impact on my confidence as a scholar.

In his presential address, D-L Stewart (2022) critiqued Boyer's (1990) scholarship of discovery as rooted in settler colonialism, positioning the researcher/scholar with the power and the expert who reports the "Truth." The message I took from my tenure case was that the scholarship of discovery was what a deserving scholar did. And, Stewart continued, if the scholarship of discovery does harm, then it is essential to exorcise it. He provided an alternative, conceptualizing a scholarship of ideation, or the development of ideas and concepts. I believe this type of scholarship is more generative, necessary, and warrants those of us who are faculty to legitimate it in our policies and practices. It also has the potential to include and celebrate practitioners as knowledge producers and holders in ways the scholarship of discovery does not.

However, I am left wondering what is salvageable in the scholarship of discovery and for the scholars of discovery. Is there any way to conduct the scholarship of discovery, eliminate damage and harm, and center humanity? Its history makes it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine this—thus we may need an additional reconceptualization of the scholarship of discovery. Ana Martínez-Alemán, Brian Pusser, and Estella Bensimon's (2015) edited text, *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education: A Practical Introduction* provides rich insights toward this notion. Amanda Tachine and Z Nicolazzo (2022), as well as the collaborators in their book, *Weaving an Otherwise: In-Relation Methodological Practice*, push us even further to decolonialize research. Also, critical quantitative scholars, for example, Ryan Wells, Jay Garvey, Christa Winkler, Annie Wofford, and Nichole Garcia, and critical qualitative scholars, such as Penny Pasque, Rozana Carducci, Tania Mitchell, Natasha Croom, and Leslie Gonzales, may help us develop this further.

I am also reminded of the contributions first made in their dissertation research by Dajanae Palmer's (2021) use of Sista Circle methods, Stephanie Hernandez Rivera's (2021) engagement with pláticas and testimonios, and Amanda Carr's (2024) use of body mapping and embodiment work. Methods such as these reject extraction, and work to eliminate harm to minoritized communities. Rather, they acknowledge the expert is the community, akin to Stewart's (2022) call for the scholarship of ideation. This work intentionally

incorporates and elevates the knowledge, wisdom, and expertise of others' lived experiences.

However, as Lori Patton Davis (2018) pushed us to consider in her presidential address, the problem may not rest in a particular method; instead the problem is the discourse that some methods lead us to work that is superior. There is no doubt that in academia, the scientific method and reproducibility remain the gold standard. This is reinforced by the retraction of an article (Protzko et al., 2024) in *Nature Human Behavior,* which celebrated that reproducibility was no longer in crisis. Ironically, the study they published could not be reproduced because of incomplete reporting of the data and analysis. So as scholars, we are told that we must continue to search for the elusive reproducibility. Or, instead, the message is that there are other legitimate and responsive approaches to scholarship that lead us to new ideas, concepts, theories, policy, and practice.

To be clear, reproducibility is not a terrible scientific concept—it suggests that we must be transparent, and it reinforces that work must be both rigorous and trustworthy. However, the discourse surrounding it reinforces a hierarchy of epistemologies and methodologies. For those of us, like myself, whose epistemological and methodological approaches are rooted in social constructivism, critical qualitative design, and rejection of a grand narrative or big "T" truth, reproducibility will always remain elusive and our scholarly identities marginalized. This should not be, as Gary Rhoades (2014) argued, the higher education we choose. Instead, I join Leslie Gonzales (2018) in pressing for opportunities to foster epistemic justice in the academy: rewarding and making legitimate space for knowledges that have been marginalized.

You Are Not a Scholar: Academic Administrator

A few years after I received tenure, I was asked to serve as department chair. As someone who studied faculty work and the systems and structures that mutually shape them, taking on this role came with risks regarding my ability to keep the productivity train on the tracks. Time is finite, after all. Although relatively recently tenured, I was the most senior person in the department and I agreed to the role. Almost overnight, the relationships shifted between me and my colleagues. I was "on the dark side," the "them" to the "us and them." Much like my early experience at ASHE when others (and I) questioned if I was a scholar, I again questioned my scholarly identity. I continued to publish and present and work toward becoming a full professor, but it was largely in the shadows and on borrowed time.

In 2016, while I was in the promotion to full process, I moved to the Graduate School. Time to read and write became even more challenging, especially because I did not want to give into the palpable productivity and

neoliberal cultures, and ranking regime that Leslie Gonzales and Anne-Marie Núñez (2014) described. Yet, did this quest once again diminish my scholarly identity? I wanted a more holistic life, one modeled by Gary Rhoades when I was applying to PhD programs. As an aside, one of the deciding factors in choosing to study at Arizona was the time Gary took to come to campus over winter break to meet with me—but only after he spent time with his daughter horseback riding.

I never left the ASHE community; it was my lifeline to my scholarly identity, even if I did not feel very scholarly. I stayed connected to the field as a journal editor, reviewer, and advisor. I am indebted to every student with whom I have had the privilege to work as a dissertation, thesis, or project chair and as a committee member throughout my career; they have kept me intellectually curious and tethered to new ideas and methodologies.

As an administrator, I also became part of new communities and associations, and I brought my positionality as a higher education scholar to those spaces and places. Over time, I also found more folks I knew from ASHE in these spaces—they are scholarly spaces, not only because of those of us in them, but because of the very nature of the work that comes from them including reports, practice, policy briefs, research studies, and advocacy work. However, the coupling between these organizations and ASHE is loose, and largely uni-directional. Yet, I have had rich opportunities to collaborate and learn from these organizations to produce new ideas, knowledge, and transform our institutions from may angles.

For example, at the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), I met Hiro Okahana and continued my connection with Mizzou grad, Enyu Zhao. I work in the same administrative landscape as higher ed scholars Natasha Croom, Susan Marine, Tiffany Davis, Melissa McDaniel, Christa Porter, Joy Williamson-Lott, and Stephen John Quaye. CGS has benefited from the publications and presentations of Julie Posselt, Liliana Garces, Lorelle Espinoza, Ann Austin, Kimberly Griffin, Millie Garcia, Phil Altbach, Rashné Jehangir, David Nguyen, Jason Wallace, among others. The potential for the future of what we know, what we do, and how we argue for the value of higher education is strengthened by our connections with associations like CGS, ACPA-College Student Educators International, NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, American Association for the Advancement of Science, International Association of Universities, National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, American Council on Education, the National Academies, and so many others. The scholarly field of higher education benefits from a tighter coupling and multi-directional relationship.

There are many messages that the academic machine wants us to embrace. Among them, we may be acknowledged as scholars within our institutions, largely if we are tenure stream and tenured, and unless you move into aca-

demic administration—and yet, there is a contradiction in that we are often not considered expert in our own universities. How many times have you been in meetings when the plan is to hire a "consultant" from another institution, despite local expertise? At the same time, we must ask whether the institution would recognize the work you would do as scholarship—a point against academic administration and service as legitimate scholarly work. Likewise, the idea that "hiring our own" remains taboo on many campuses, as if a graduate cannot be independent from their mentors and have fresh ideas and perspectives unless they spend time elsewhere first—even if they may be the ideal scholar for the job (Rhoades et al., 2008).

I Am a Scholar

My scholarly journey brings me to today, as past-president of ASHE. I am grateful and humbled, and I am a scholar. Despite systems that are in place that may make us question our scholarly selves, be(com)ing a scholar and being in a scholarly community should be restorative. We are an applied (Stewart, 2022) and, as Kris Renn (2020) argued, a low consensus field. Perhaps that makes our umbrella of scholars bigger than other fields. This, of course, means that in some contexts we lose the "prestige" game—but if we are concerned about that, are we not complicit in reinforcing the neoliberal forces so many of us critique?

Instead, we must work as a community to dismantle these hierarchies and make room for all scholars. We must proudly and with confidence acknowledge that we are scholars. We each have something to contribute to the field of higher education that has value and should be valued. We must work hard to think about who is harmed and who benefits from our scholarship of service, activism, ideation, mentoring, teaching, policy, and practice.

Moreover, if inclusion, equity, and organizational diversity are among our values, we must be willing to consider the ways in which assumptions about who can and should be a scholar limit what we can accomplish as a community. We must critically interrogate the exclusionary practices in which we engage regarding be(com)ing a scholar and how those practices compromise the integrity of our scholarship. I believe we become better scholars by doing so—and in that way, we create better scholarship.

Higher education, and the communities in which we work and live, are faced with vexing, complex, and wicked problems. We can anticipate some of the problems ahead, given the current U.S. socio-political context, many of which we are already facing and are likely to escalate. For example, we should prepare for anti-Black racism and anti-DEI legislation to be valorized; risks to the futures of DACA recipients; elimination of rights for trans* folks and the LGB community; fewer protections against sexual harassment, gender

discrimination, and economic equality in our workplaces and classrooms; the devaluation of science; further limits to access and equity in our institutions; the decline in numbers of international scholars on our campuses; increases in negative perceptions of the value and public good benefits of higher education; decreases in federal funding to higher education, including financial aid; and precarity of academic freedom and tenure, among other threats. We cannot be complacent, as our work continues to evidence the real consequences of policy decisions that are likely ahead of us. We need all our scholarly selves to collectively find solutions and actively work toward our purpose and the purpose of higher education.

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