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# The Ontology of Scholar-Administrators: Empirical Inferences from Five Senior Administrators Who Published

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## The Ontology of Scholar-Administrators: Empirical Inferences from Five Senior Administrators Who Published

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in existing literature on scholar-administrators and understand the lived experience of scholar-administrators who published. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach to extract themes from detailed case studies of five senior academic administrators who have published, the researchers' empirical inferences from the five detailed case histories reveal the challenges and rewards of producing scholarship as a scholar-administrator. Their findings show that the administrators were more connected to the people within and outside the university, their own field of practice, and with the university. The impact of scholarship on scholar-administrators goes beyond publications. Continuation of being a scholar-practitioner has significant impact on networking scope of administrators keeping the educational entities they lead abreast of environmental trends to adapt to. Future research should replicate our study to increase the generalizability of its findings.

### Keywords

Scholar-Administrator, Higher Education Administrators, Impact of Scholarship, Synergies in Higher Education, Academic Administration, Interpretative Phenomenology

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## The Ontology of *Scholar-Administrators*: Empirical Inferences from Five Senior Administrators Who Published

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While the purpose of scholarship can be characterized as helping “the field adapt to the context in which...it is practiced” (Allen, 2002, p. 147), there is a general lack of understanding of what it means to produce scholarship within higher education administration, due to higher education lacking a “tradition of administrator research paralleling teacher research” (Riehl, Larson, Short, & Reitzug, 2000, p. 399). Further, there is a widely held belief that administration and scholarship are two functions within higher education that cannot co-exist; faculty produce scholarship and administrators administrate, with never the two to meet (Riehl et al., 2000; Young, 2001). This mental divide between faculty, scholarship, and administration has resulted in what Riehl et al. (2000) described as “two distinct communities of practice” (p. 408): administrators who interact, communicate, and complete tasks and the contrasting academic researchers, whose community of practice is producing research. While Riehl et al. (2000) conceded that it was unlikely for the two communities of practice in education to ever combine, they believed that if scholarship were owned more explicitly by all stakeholders, then higher education would become more effective. During our literature review no published literature was identified concerning what it was like to produce scholarship as an administrator, and the literature available does not address the lived-experience of producing scholarship. Our study addresses this gap in extant knowledge by employing an ontological study of lived experiences of scholar-administrators who have published.

### Literature Review

Beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s specializations began to emerge in higher education administration, creating what eventually would become three broad, distinct areas

within higher education administration: academic affairs, business affairs, and student affairs. While many different departments exist within higher education administration, most departments fall within the scope of one of the three previously mentioned areas of administration academic, student, or business affairs. Higher education administration has fine-grained definitions that date back to early 1900s. Eliot (1908) wrote:

Anyone who makes himself familiar with all the branches of university administration in its numerous departments of teaching, in its financial and maintenance departments, its museums, laboratories, and libraries, in its extensive grounds and numerous buildings for various purposes, and in its social organization, will realize that the institution is properly named the university. It touches all human interests, is concerned with the past, the present, and the future, ranges through the whole history of letters, sciences, arts, and professions, and aspires to teach all systemized knowledge. More and more, as time goes on, and individual and social wealth accumulates, it will find itself realizing its ideal of yesterday, though still pursuing eagerly its ideal for tomorrow. (p. 254)

In the 1920s there was a rise in the publication of books dedicated to specific areas of administration and the creation of “the three main divisions of educational administration” (p. 142) Lloyd-Jones wrote about in 1934: operational administration, instructional administration, and student-personnel administration, which are business affairs, academic affairs, and student affairs today. From an operational or business perspective Arnett (1922) wrote *College and University Finance*, focusing on the financial aspects of college administration. What was then student-personnel administration saw a boom in works with Hudelson (1928) *Problem of college education: studies in administration*, focused specifically on issues in dealing with students, as did Seashore (1927) *Learning and living in college*, and Lloyd-Jones (1929) *Student Personnel Work at Northwestern University*. However, there were other comprehensive books on higher education administration, which were published during the same period: Kelly’s (1925) *Tendencies in college administration*, as well as Lindsay and Holland’s (1930) seminal work in the field, *College and university administration*.

Lindsay and Holland’s (1930) comprehensive 666 page volume marks an effective end to examining higher education administration as a whole and solidifies the specialization of higher education administration in three basic administrative areas: operational or fiscal administration, instructional or academic administration, and personnel administration (now student affairs). Further, the 1930s saw a rise in a new form of media, the scholarly journal, which furthered and sped the disaggregation of higher education administration into specific fields. In particular *The Journal of Higher Education* provided a platform for the further development of each field as a separate area of specialty in higher education administration.

### **Seminal Works on Scholarship**

Any modern dialogue around scholarship in higher education usually begins in some form with Boyer (1990) and the domains of scholarship his work established: the scholarship of application, the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, and the scholarship of teaching. While the primary driving force for the current dialogue in and around scholarship in higher education, other works by a small group of researchers sought to expand the measurement and meaning of scholarship from the narrow definition of scholarship as research, discovery, and publication which took hold following World War II, to a more holistic dimension beyond the published article or scholarly books (Braxton et al., 2002). Of note are

the works of Miller (1972), Seldin (1980), Braxton and Toombs (1982), and Pellino et al. (1984), which is covered in the following paragraphs.

Differentiating between basic and applied research was the first step in developing a broader definition of scholarship (Miller, 1972). In this instance basic research meant traditional inquiry for publication, whereas applied research was more associated with unique applications of specialized knowledge. According to Miller, the emphasis in evaluation should come from the departmental priorities related to the application of scholarship. Seldin (1980) took Miller's acknowledgement of different applications for scholarship one step further by calling on institutional leaders to declare the type of scholarship they supported, basic or applied, within their institutions. Braxton and Toombs (1982) and Pellino et al. (1984) delineate specific activities and actions deemed as scholarship through empirical studies of both faculty and administration. Noteworthy is that administrators' participation in both Braxton and Toombs (1982) and Pellino et al.'s (1984) studies was limited to questions on administrative expectations for faculty regarding scholarship, not research related to their own scholarly experiences, which is the focus of our current study.

Ultimately, all of the works noted have two things in common, as do most works on scholarship within higher education. The first is the definition of, scholarship, and the second is how it applies to faculty evaluation, promotion, and tenure. It is commonly known that about 90% of all research journal articles are written by about 10% of the professoriate, yet scholarship as traditionally defined by publication exists in almost any faculty evaluation (Boyer, 1990). This means that a broader view of scholarship was needed so that more faculty could meet their tenure and promotion criteria. Thus the collective meaning sought in these works was a broader definition of scholarship, as a function, not for a greater understanding of scholarship, rather for more categories on faculty reviews and evaluations. Boyer (1990) continued this tradition with his four domains of scholarship, which has been the prevailing view on scholarship for faculty in higher education almost ever since.

### **Current Theories on Scholarship**

In the twenty years since Boyer's seminal work numerous writers and researchers have expanded, broadened, and deepened the definitions found in the four domains of scholarship. Most of the works in the last twenty years have typically dealt with one of the four domains specifically and, according to Google Scholar, Boyer's 1990 seminal work had been cited at least 9,519 times as of February 2016 (GoogleScholar, 2016a). The extensive reach and reference to the work clearly makes it the seminal work in the field of scholarship in higher education. Further, it continues to be the basis for dialogue regarding scholarship in the academy. Each of Boyer's four domains represents some aspect of traditional views on scholarship: service, teaching, and research.

Boyer's (1990) domains of scholarship continue to be the primary basis for discussion on scholarship for faculty today and that is where the discussion ends, with the faculty and the forms of scholarship for which faculty are recognized. As referenced below, nowhere in the literature is there information on the meaning found in the experience of producing scholarship, nor is there much information on what administrators should be doing with regard to scholarship. However, one work, that of Riehl et al. (2000), begins to call attention to the need for scholarship within education administration, but this work was focused on K-12 or public school administration, and not higher education administration.

## Gaps in the Literature

The focus in the scholarship written on higher education administration has been on the practice of administration, and rightfully so. The intent of scholarship is to inform practice (Komives, 2001); accordingly the majority of all research on higher education administration focuses on the various functions of administration. However, that does not mean that administrators do not or should not produce or participate in scholarship; thus the experience of those that can and have produced or participated in scholarship can prove vital to the future growth of administration and other administrators.

There are a number of notable works on the history or knowledge base in public education administration including: Callahan (1962); Campbell, Fleming, Newell, and Bennion (1987); Culbertson (1988); Donmoyer (1999); Riehl et al. (2000); and Willower and Forsyth (1999). These works focus on scholarship in educational administration from a public school or school administrator perspective and do not deal with the issues situations or content relevant to higher education administration. According to Riehl et al. (2000), “in contrast with the growing body of teacher research, there is little evidence of similar growth within education administration” and “there is little discussion of research conducted by administrators themselves” (p. 399). The “little discussion” Riehl et al. (2000) were referring to is more than what exists in higher education administration. No similar works to those on K-12 or public school administration could be found outlining the history or meaning of scholarship within higher education administration as a broad field or as a specific activity. Riehl et al. (2000) inquired why there is no tradition of administrator research paralleling teacher research and what can we do to shift the image of a scholar.

The idea of a scholarship of administration is potentially significant but has seen little research, despite the magnitude of the role played by administrators in higher education. As previously mentioned scholarship and the discussion of scholarship has in many ways been largely *confined* or more appropriately *defined* by the professorate. In a search on Google Scholar more than 10,900 articles or citations were found using the terms *Boyer* and *Scholarship of* in the search within just the social sciences field, since 1990 were retrieved (Google Scholar, 2016b). Of the four domains detailed above, the scholarship of teaching had the most hits, 5,930, (2016c) more than doubling the next highest domain written about, discovery 2500 (2016d). Application (2016e) and integration (2016f) were tied for the next most common result with 2,080 hits returned. Even our search for Boyer and the scholarship of engagement (2016g), a debated fifth domain of scholarship, found 1910 hits. However, a search for the scholarship of administration (2016h) came back with only 19 entries. Thinking maybe the word *Boyer* was limiting our search; we removed him and retrieved 50 entries (2016i). A review of those 50 entries revealed they were all about Writing Program Administration, which fails to capture the meaning and experience of producing scholarship as an administrator, the focus of the study as it focuses exclusively on writing program administrators. Writing program administrators include those administrative professionals who run the various writing labs, writing centers, or any other writing program at a college or university (McCloud, 2007). In summary our literature review produced no previous scholarship on the lived-experience of producing scholarship as a higher education administrator or the associated meaning thereof.

## Research Question and Objectives

The current research focused on a single overarching research question: What is the meaning of the lived-experience for administrators in the production of scholarship? From

within this question two research objectives emerged from the phenomenological, hermeneutic orientation (Van Manen, 1990).

1. Understanding the appearance of the lived-experience of producing scholarship for higher education administrators.
2. Explore the essence or meaning of the lived-experience of producing scholarship for each of the higher education administrators.

## **Research Methods**

Phenomenology is concerned with experience, i.e., the appearance, while hermeneutics is focused on making sense of the experience, the interpretation of meaning (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Completing the first research objective of creating an understanding of the scholarship experience involved determining what scholarship was for each study participant. Within phenomenological hermeneutics it is important for everyone who might participate in the ongoing dialogue have some shared understanding or familiarity of the world in which the experience occurs (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Ricoeur, 1976, Van Manen, 1990). The domain of scholarship, that is, the scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of discovery, within each participant in this study practiced provides a foundation for that shared familiarity of the world experienced by the participants. It was the experience within this world of scholarship for higher education administrators that was explored in the study.

Phenomenological inquiry is not about generalizations in the field; rather it is about an in-depth understanding of individual situations (Van Manen, 1990). Using hermeneutics as the basis for making interpretive sense of the lived-experiences was intended to increase the potential pedagogical contributions of the work (Ricoeur, 1976). The method employed included interviews, creating interview transcripts, conducting several readings to provide underpinnings for a naive understanding, performing structural analysis to identify themes and sub-themes and validate different naive understandings, and ultimately developing thematic gestalts that are consistent with the details (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

## **Participants**

The approach to identifying and selecting participants for this study followed a convenience-based, purposeful sampling technique that provided specific boundaries for the sample (Merriam, 2009). Since the total population of administrative scholars was unknown prior to the study, a decision was made to limit participants to the colleges and universities in the Southwestern United States for ease of access. The 2009 Higher education directory (Burke, 2009) and institutional websites were used to identify potential administrator candidates. Recruitment emails were sent to 44 administrators at seven different public institutions in the Southwest resulting in seven willing candidates, with five participants, all of whom have published in scholarly journals. Hence, we denominate our study participants as scholar-administrators. Individual narrative descriptions are provided for each of the participants to provide context for understanding their experiences. Pseudonyms are used for identifiers, such as names and professional titles, in order to protect anonymity of the participants.

## **Procedure**

Individual semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collected in the current study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. The interviews consisted of both open-ended, structured questions and open-ended, unstructured

questions (Merriam, 2009). Following Spradley's (1979) specific grand tour approach the structured questions, based on the type of scholarship the administrator was practicing, were used to set up the un-structured questions to explore specific examples and instances pertaining to the five administrator's individual scholarship experiences.

As discourse, the interviews and subsequent transcripts were textual representations of the lived-experience of the participants and were a textual representation of an event tying hermeneutics and phenomenology together. The uncovering of the essence of being within the text occurred through the parallel processes of phenomenological *epoché* with regard to lived-experience and hermeneutic *distanciation* associated with historical efficacy (Ricoeur, 1981).

Each participant interview was transcribed to create the texts for data analysis. The data analysis process was based on the phenomenological hermeneutic approach articulated by Lindseth and Norberg (2004), and the work upon which their method is based, Ricoeur's (1976) interpretation theory. The interpretation process is to "move from understanding to explaining" (p. 74) and then from the explanation to a more depth understanding or comprehension of the meaning of the text (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Ricoeur, 1976) to develop thematic gestalts that are consistent with the details.

### Empirical Inferences

There was no judgment involved in identifying the thematic clusters as the interview transcripts were directly related to one or more of the thematic clusters. Since the goal of the study is to simply surface patterns of themes that underlie lived experiences of higher education administrators but not their relative importance there is no author bias introduced in classifying the themes. Direct recitation of the comments throughout the interview transcripts was done to minimize the author's rephrasing bias. The intent in the text interpretation process is to "move from understanding to explaining" (p. 74) and then from the explanation to a more depth understanding or comprehension of the meaning of the text (Ricoeur, 1976). The movement from understanding to explaining and back to understanding occurs in what Ricoeur (1976) termed the hermeneutic circle, cycling from guess to validation to uncover the most probable interpretation. The circular process occurred in this study through a naive grasping or guessing as to the meaning of the text as a whole. The resultant thematic clusters are presented next as an empirical summation of the five higher education administrators' interviews in this study.

**Theme 1 - Notion of "value of scholarship."** Consistently the five interviewees expressed that the very act of producing scholarship as an administrators has enhanced the value of scholarship in their eyes. Especially when research was not a job requirement as an administrator, engagement in research has given them greater appreciation for not only the effort required to do research but also the consequent impacts that research has on all other aspects of academia such as in teaching as well as service. Being *scholar-administrators* has also given them some respect and recognition amongst faculty as evidenced by the additional weight given to their views in evaluation of academic merit for faculty.

**Theme 2 – Greater empathy for scholarly efforts.** Academic administration roles pull the individual from scholarly activities focused on producing new knowledge toward more mundane processes management roles such as budgeting, scheduling, advising and other operational management tasks that inevitably reduce the emphasis on scholarship. In fact senior administrators are not expected to produce scholarship though they are expected to establish and maintain administrative support systems, processes, structures and evaluative frameworks to facilitate and encourage scholarship at the institutional level in particular and individual level in general. However, the lived experience in producing scholarship as senior academic administrators strengthens their scholarly connections in a reciprocal manner. The senior administrators view the faculty with greater empathy and the faculty view the senior

administrators with greater respect. The bi-directionality of the administration-faculty relationship becomes stronger engendering greater trust. A specific example lies in the granular understanding of the quality of publication outlets as “rankings of journals” becomes a more easily defined collaborative task for the faculty and administrators.

**Theme 3 – Greater scholarly connections inside the institution.** The lived experiences of administrators who have published reveal their networking scope with faculty inside their institutions has significantly expanded due primarily to their scholarly activities. Collaborating with faculty members on joint research projects has strengthened their bonds with the faculty and has generated a mutual appreciation for the work realms of academic administration and faculty jobs. Collaborative work is not always task oriented and the socializing that takes place as an integral part of the work interactions resulted in stronger bonds within the institution. One senior administrator expressed her ease with which she could corral the faculty members with whom she published scholarly work to participate in university level committees (e.g., online curriculum for the core; fund raising committee for the new entrepreneurship center, “Assurance of Learning” committee for accreditation agencies, etc.). Scholarly connections inside the institution do not remain purely scholarly but remain strong and extend into other modes of interactions that benefit the institution immensely.

**Theme 4 – Greater scholarly connections outside the institution.** Beyond attending the job-related conferences such as AACSB or other accrediting agency conferences or other academic-administration-focused conferences, senior administrators also attend academic conferences to make presentations, collaborate with outside faculty members in research, and interact with students in pedagogical research projects. Though this scholarly aspect of outside connections is not widely apparent, those limited number of academic administrators who engage in such scholarly connections outside the institution have explicitly noted the beneficial impacts of such expanded scope of external relationships. Two senior administrators noted the influence of scholarly connections outside the institution to have radically shaped their view of faculty inside their own institutions. Specific examples include journal quality rankings, balance between teaching and research, and diversity in faculty recruiting.

**Theme 5 - Scholarship and connecting with the field.** This theme is not people-oriented but knowledge-oriented. Even though “people” and “knowledge” are inextricably connected, it behooves one to distinguish between the two because not all people-connections result in changes in one’s views of the world. The broader networking relationships significantly enriched the perspectives of the administrators on higher education trends and current events. The administrators who have published expressed greater awareness of the technological changes in higher education and organizational responses to these changes. They have also noted that research, teaching and academic administration have several synergistic connections that are beneficial to making their institutions more effective. In participating in scholarship, administrators have the opportunity to network and connect with people, regardless of the type of scholarship they are doing. The point is that participation in scholarship provides a way for administrators to connect with relevant stakeholders both personally and professionally, enhancing the educational environment for both the administrative scholar and the stakeholders they deal with in the scholarship process. Being a *scholar-administrator* also opens a more meaningful connection with the field of higher education itself. One administrator noted that his scholarly activities made him stay current with the changes in the external environment and consequently enabled him to make informed decisions to better serve his institution.

**Theme 6 - Scholarship and connecting with the institutional mission.** Ultimately, the goal of any higher education institution is educating its students and transforming them into responsible and productive citizens of the world. Each institution has its own mission and vision, which defines the approach to and perspective on education at that institution. Teaching,

research and service often form the “*three legged stool*” though the relative weights associated with each of the three varies depending on the institution and the context in which the institution operates. However, our research has revealed that being a scholar is really about being well informed which leads to better quality decisions. A Scholar-teacher, therefore, would be in a better position to choose high quality content to teach in his/her courses; would choose high quality pedagogical methods in his/her teaching and would implement candid feedback loops to ensure an ongoing continuous improvement. Likewise one can envisage scholar-practitioner who would make informed decisions applying the best current knowledge to bear on the problems he/she is solving. Under the broader genre of scholar-practitioners, we will put scholar-administrators who are the subjects of our study. In summary, scholarly activities provide the basis for positive changes. The institutional mission is most effectively achieved when it pursued with openness to the best knowledge.

### Discussion and Implications

Thematic elicitation from complex ontology (actual lived experiences) requires “an abridged version within a single sentence of the complex interplay of signification that characterize the literary work as a whole” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 46). In other words, a good simple example that illustrates a complex explanation can help readers to achieve a better understanding of the meaning. To illustrate our interpretation of the meaning of the ontology of *scholar-administrators* holds for those who have published, the following metaphor is offered: Scholarship in administration is social networking.

According to Garton, Haythornthwaite, and Wellman (1997), a social network is people or organizations connected via a computer network. If you replace the computer with participation in scholarship, administrators can use scholarship to connect with both people and organizations. For example, the scholarship of teaching can connect administrators to students and the scholarship of application can connect administrators to organizations within the field. Within social networks, there are sets of people or organizations, connected by various social relationships, such as being co-workers or friends (Garton et al., 1997). For the administrators in this study, the different forms of scholarship can take represent the various social relationships possible through social networking. The inherent ability to engage with other individuals within one’s own field of study found in scholarship provides another connection between scholarship and social networking.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), one of the defining characteristics that makes social networking unique is that it actually enables participants to connect more with people “who share some offline connection.” Likewise, participation in scholarship connects participating administrators to other people and communities where they share the connection of a common interest. The point is, within scholarship, like social networking, relationships and connections already exist; it is about exercising the opportunity that makes the connections meaningful.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Our study has a limited sample size. Our exploratory study into the meaning of the lived-experience of administrators who published highlights several potential avenues for future research. The first opportunity for future research would be to expand the current study, which could occur in a couple of ways. Future iterations of the research design could be used to explore the meaning for *scholar-administrators* at different types of institutions.

Beyond additional qualitative research, several more quantitatively oriented studies could build on the conclusions and interpretations found in this study. Since the total size of

the current administrative scholar population is unknown, a survey to generate a better understanding of the scope and size of the field of study is important. Beyond knowing the extent of the participants in the field of scholarship in administration, surveys with questions for administrators, such as about their participation in scholarship, the type(s) of scholarship they practice, how often they participate in scholarship, and how they use scholarship in their daily administrative practice would help to define the field more accurately for future study.

### Conclusion

Our study reveals that expanded scope of networking inside and outside the institution, enhanced views about the linkages between scholarship and other aspects of higher education entities, keeping current and making informed decisions are the expressed themes identified in the lived experiences of scholar-administrators. Going back to our research question regarding the meaning of the lived-experience of scholarship for administrators and the first question about what is the difference between administrators who do participate in scholarship and those who do not, it is clear that participation in scholarship allowed these administrators to connect more with education and the educational process within their institution and the respective disciplines or fields of study. Without saying that those administrators who do not participate in scholarship are not connected to the education process or the institutional mission; our study suggests that scholarship activity would enhance such connections.

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