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Professors of Higher Education/Student Affairs and the Scholarship of Practice

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Abstract

For professors of higher education/student affairs, the primary object of inquiry is the university. Yet lore of the divide among faculty and administration looms large over the academy, ranging from perceived dissonance to overt hostility (Bess and Dee, 2014; McMillian and Berberet, 2002; Rice, 1996). With the multitude of issues emerging in the present landscape of higher education, it is worth exploring the real extent of this divide. This article explores the question: Do scholars of higher education/student affairs have or take the opportunity to translate their technical, disciplinary skill into practical assistance to the benefit of their respective institutions? This article provides the preliminary results of an exploratory study of professors of higher education/student affairs and the extent to which they engage in the scholarship of practice (Braxton, 2005) on their own campuses.

Introduction

For professors of higher education/student affairs, the primary object of inquiry is the university. These scholars devote their careers to the exploration of the many dynamics that comprise this complex system. Yet lore of the divide among faculty and administration looms large over the academy, ranging from perceived dissonance to overt hostility (Bess & Dee, 2014; McMillian & Berberet, 2002; Rice, 1996).

With the multitude of issues emerging in the present landscape of higher education, it is worth exploring the real extent of this divide. Issues ranging from higher education finance, the rise of non-tenure track faculty, controversial presidential leadership, diversity on campus, and the role of intercollegiate athletics often pit faculty at odds with institutional leaders. Applied specifically to the field of higher education/student affairs, this raises an important question: Do scholars of higher education/student affairs have or take the opportunity to translate their technical, disciplinary skills into practical assistance to the benefit of their respective institutions? Or, to what extent do professors of higher education/student affairs engage in the scholarship of practice (Braxton, 2005) on their campuses?

The scholarship of practice is inspired by Ernest Boyer's framework of scholarship (Boyer, Moser, Ream, & Braxton, 2015), and is defined as that which focuses on "the development and refinement of applicatory knowledge, as the applicatory knowledge entails the translation of technical knowledge into action" (Braxton, 2005, p. 288). More specifically, Braxton states two primary goals of the scholarship of practice: the improvement of administrative practice and the development of a knowledge base worthy of professional status for administrative work. Such goals include the employment of empirical research to develop institutional policy and practice. The pages that follow will report findings of a preliminary, exploratory online survey administered to professors in graduate programs of higher education/student affairs across the United States. A list of over 700 professors was compiled and the survey was distributed via email in March 2015. The survey and sought to explore questions such as:

- Do university leaders seek out scholars of higher education for insight on pressing issues facing their own institution?
- Do scholars of higher education seek to employ the scholarship of practice at their own institution? If so, what compels them to do so? If not, what barriers hinder such efforts?

- Are scholars of higher education rewarded for their efforts in the scholarship of practice at their own institution? If so, what are those rewards?

Methodology

An online survey was developed to gather insights from faculty of higher education and student affairs and their scholarship of practice. This survey was piloted at the researchers' own institution for quality control. An email list of professors of higher education/student affairs was developed from relevant listservs and institutional websites. An email was sent to the distribution list with a link to participate. Results were analyzed utilizing primarily descriptive analysis, as this is a preliminary, exploratory study. The 34-question survey contained three main components. The first component sought to gather demographic information of both the faculty member's institution and higher education experience. Following the demographics, faculty were inquired through a four point Likert-scale of frequency to what extent university leaders sought their insight on twelve areas pertinent to higher education. In order to explore those who proactively offered their insight to university leaders to those who did not, a third component included a question that branched the participants into different sets of questions to explore motivations and perceived impact. Several open-ended questions were included throughout to seek further clarification.

Analytical Procedures

An initial 136 respondents' data were collected. After cleansing the data for incomplete survey completion, 128 responses were analyzed utilizing Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). As the study sought to be exploratory, basic descriptive analysis was employed seeking frequencies, averages, and cross-tab comparisons.

Findings

The results of this study are compelling, symbolized by the comments of one participant: "This study is of significant interest to me as I have observed a lack of collaboration between Higher Education faculty and our campus' willingness to engage them in problems solving with regard to student success . . ." Another scholar remarked, "This prophet is disparaged in his home town . . ." Yet another scholar provides a more hopeful perspective, responding, "We are a teaching oriented institution and the scholarship of practice is valued." What leads to such disparate

experiences among our guild? This article will report preliminary findings of this survey, highlight points of discussion, and offer conclusions that either promote best practices or provide informed suggestions for bridging any gaps among higher education/student affairs faculty and university administrators.

Of the 700 professors that received the survey, 128 participated, resulting in an 18% response rate. An initial email was sent, followed by two reminder emails. As this was a preliminary study, more research and analysis is required to determine sample representativeness. Demographic information of the participants provides insight into the results.

Participants were asked to provide institutional type (see below), of which the majority of faculty taught at midsize or large public institutions (nearly 70% in total).

<i>Type of Institution (coded)</i>		
	Frequency	Percent
Small Private	18	14.1
Large Private	9	7.0
Small Public	7	5.5
Midsize Public	51	39.8
Large Public	38	29.7
No Answer	5	3.9
Total	128	100.0

Faculty were also asked to provide the degrees granted in their program of appointment. The majority (65.6%) taught at institutions that provides master's and doctoral academic programs. The remaining (34.4%) were master's only program.

Participants were also asked to provide their current rank (see below) and whether or not their appointment is full-time (85%) or part-time (15%). Most participants were tenured (41%) or tenure track (40%), leaving only 19% as non-tenure track. Just over 1/3 of participants maintain another position at the university (34%), the majority of which are their program's chairs/coordinators. A small number (6) of faculty were also senior administrators.

<i>What is your current rank?</i>		
	Frequency	Percent
Assistant Professor	53	41.4
Associate Professor	39	30.5
Full Professor	26	20.3
Visiting Professor	2	1.6
Lecturer	3	2.3
Adjunct	4	3.1
Total	127	99.2
Missing System	1	0.8
Total	128	100.0

Participants were also asked to provide their years of teaching at their current institution and in higher education overall. The average years taught by participants at their current institution was 7.82 years, while the career average is 11.12 years. Faculty members were also given a list of research areas and were asked to “check all that apply” to them. Most prevalent areas of research were “student affairs” (53.1% of respondents), “diversity/equity” (41.3%), “identity development/moral development/spirituality” (37%), and assessment (24.2%). Participants were asked, “To what extent do university leaders seek out scholars of higher education/student affairs for insight on issues facing policy and planning at their own institution?” A list of areas was provided, drawn primarily from the most commonly listed expertise areas of the faculty who were sent the survey. Participants were asked to select one response according to their frequency (ranging from frequently, occasionally, once, and never). These areas included:

- Higher Education Landscape
- Organizational Leadership
- Academic and Educational Strategy
- My Institution’s Strategic Plan
- Comprehensive Review of Educational Programs
- Faculty Development and Governance
- Retention Strategy
- Issues of Diversity
- Institutional Advancement
- Athletics

- Accreditation
- Online/Distance Learning
- Other (please type)

Of the areas inquired, the results overwhelmingly demonstrated a lack of inquiry from the university to HESA faculty members. The only exception was the area of “higher education landscape” in which a majority of respondents were frequently or occasionally (54% in total) sought for their expertise. The three least inquired areas, in which faculty selected “never” were athletics (84%), online/distance learning (70%) and faculty development/governance (68%).

Those faculty that were sought by their institutions were asked their method of being inquired. The majority reported that a university leader asked for their input through an “informal appointment/conversation” (72%). A much smaller percentage (39%) were asked to participate in a scheduled appointment in the leader’s office. Twenty respondents were contacted via email.

Inquiries from university leaders is but one avenue in which to provide expertise. Researchers also sought to explore the extent to which professors of higher education/student affairs attempted to employ the scholarship of practice at their own institution, regardless of being asked. Nearly two thirds (65.3%) indicated offering unsolicited insight to university leadership. The majority of this group (77%) choose informal conversation or email (63%) to lend their expertise.

Those faculty that did provide their expertise were asked to provide their motivations for doing so. The most frequent response was “responsibility” (76%) followed by “institutional loyalty” (44%). When asked whether or not engaging in the scholarship of practice at their own institution had a positive influence on their institution, 61% agreed or strongly agreed that it did.

For the 34% of faculty respondents that did not initiate offering their insight to institutional leaders, they reported a number of reasons. The most frequent response was “university leadership would not welcome unsolicited insight” (37.2%). Another common response was that such efforts “do not count towards promotion or tenure” (30%). In addition, 30% cited a “lack of time.”

For those that did engage in the scholarship of practice at their respective institution, they were asked to report their rewards for such efforts. The most common response (41%) was “none.” However, 32%

did receive some form of credit towards promotion or tenure, and 10% received some form of institutional recognition.

For those faculty that did not initiate the scholarship of practice at their institution, the majority agreed (55%) or strongly agreed (18%) with the statement “I would engage in the scholarship of practice if I was officially recognized or rewarded for such work.” The majority agreed (48%) or strongly agreed (24%) that they would increase such efforts if they were recognized or rewarded.

Profile of a Highly Inquired HESA Faculty Member

Through descriptive analysis, the researchers compiled a profile of a Highly Inquired HESA Faculty Member in order to better understand how certain participants were sought after by their institutional leaders. Participants responded to questions regarding their own sense of frequency of inquiry from their respective institutions and selected from a range including “1” for frequently inquired to “4” for never inquired. Of the 128 surveyed, ten faculty members were considered “highly inquired.” “Highly inquired” means the faculty members received a score of 12-24. Such a score could have been reached by a number of different combinations—for example, through several “frequently” answered (1 point) or several “occasionally” (3 points each). Whether by occasionally being asked on an array of subject or frequently on a few, these ten faculty members were more sought out by university leaders for their expertise than their peers.

These 10 highly inquired HESA faculty members predominantly taught at small or midsize institutions. Half of the highly inquired HESA served at “midsize public institutions” (50%, 5 faculty). Three served at “small private institutions” (30%, 3 faculty), one at a “large public institution” (10%, 1 faculty), and one at a “large private institution” (10%, 1 faculty). Six of the faculty worked at institutions that provided masters and doctorate programs, while four worked at masters only institutions. There was diversity within rank, with lecturer (1), assistant professor (2), associate professor (4), and full professor (3) all represented within this “highly inquired” pool. The majority (7) were tenured, with one on the tenure track and two on a non-tenure track. Half of the group taught full-time, while the other half taught part-time in their respective academic programs, while holding other positions outside of their programs.

One respondent reported a teaching tenure at their institution of 40 years. Since this was such an outlier to the participant pool, these years were excluded from calculating teaching year averages. The average

number of years this highly inquired group had taught at their current institution was 10.11 years, with a total of 11.67 average years of teaching in higher education.

In terms of research areas university leaders sought insight for from highly inquired faculty, the three most common areas were “assessment” (50%), Student Learning (50%), and Student Affairs (50%). University leaders sought these professors’ insights in the following ways: an informal appointment/conversation (90%), a university leader scheduled an official appointment through the leader’s office (80%), a phone call initiative by the university leader (70%). It is also important to note that, in addition to being asked, all ten in this “highly inquired” group indicated that they offered insight on an area of their expertise to university leaders regarding an institutional issue. They offered this unsolicited insight through similar means: an informal appointment/conversation (100%), sending Email (90%), initiating a phone call (70%), scheduling an official appointment through leader’s office (70%).

All highly inquired faculty members were motivated by a sense of “responsibility” (100%) to offer their insight. The majority also indicated “institutional loyalty” (90%) as a primary motivating factor. Eight of the ten indicated that they received “credit in promotion or tenure file” for their Scholarship of Practice. Four faculty members noted they received “institutional recognition (an official award).” Three faculty members indicated they received “financial compensation” and three faculty members noted receiving “course reduction.” Only one faculty member noted having receive no incentive for their scholarship of practice. Nine out of ten believed that “engaging in the scholarship of practice has had a positive influence on my institution.” Nine out of ten believed “being officially recognized or rewarded for scholarship of practice would increase my engagement even more in the scholarship of practice in the future.”

Profile of a Never Inquired HESA Faculty Member

Faculty members considered “never inquired” are those respondents who received a score of 48 (answering “never,” 4pts, to each question). Since two of the faculty members did list two areas in “other” where they were contacted, they were disregarded for this profile. Fourteen of the other faculty members remained. Similarly, researchers explored those participants who were “never inquired” from institutional leaders. Of the 128 surveyed, sixteen faculty members were considered “never inquired” through the inquiry scale in which we categorized faculty members into levels.

Over a third of the never inquired faculty came from “midsize public institution” (35.7%, 5 faculty members) or a “large public institution” (35.7%, 5 faculty members). Two taught at “small private institutions” and one worked at a “large private institution” (one chose to not identify institution type). The majority of the HESA programs were masters and doctorate (78.6%, 11 faculty) and only 21.4% (3 faculty) from a masters only HESA program. With regards to rank, 6 professors in the “never inquired group” identified as assistant professor, five as associate professor, one as adjunct, and one as visiting professor. The majority (11) were tenure track, five were tenured and three were not on the tenure track. The majority (11) taught full time, while 3 taught part time.

The majority of this never inquired group (78.6%, 11 faculty) did not hold a position other than teaching in a HESA program. Those (3) that did report an additional position held the following positions: Associate Director of Residence Life, Executive Director of a Scholarly Society, and a faculty appointment in another department. This never inquired group was a less experienced group than their “highly inquired” counterparts, averaging six years of teaching at their current institution and eight years teaching per professor overall.

Half of the “never inquired” group offered unsolicited insight to institutional leaders, while the other did not. Of the half that did offer insight, 71% did so through informal appointments or conversations. Of those “never inquired” that “did not offer insight”, there was no common motivation by the majority. The most shared motivations were “no interest” (42.9%) and “distracts from research agenda” (48.9%). It is worth noting that only one faculty member indicated “university leaders would not welcome unsolicited insight” as their motivation for not sharing. The following comments were shared for motivations not to share:

I’m not certain if it would be viewed as unsolicited. I suppose there doesn’t seem to be any precedent for doing that. If I knew they would welcome it, I might do it. There is also the fear factor—stepping out too much while not yet tenured.

There is a power differential, and while feedback might be welcome, it may not be. As a relatively new faculty member to the institution, that is risky. In addition, other (more senior faculty) may not support the move (again, making it risky).

Of the seven that did not offer unsolicited insight, two “strongly agreed” and three “agreed” that they “would engage in the scholarship of practice if I was officially recognized or rewarded for my work.” One was “neutral” and one “disagreed.” Of the seven, three “strongly agreed” and three “agreed” that they “would engage in the scholarship of practice if I knew such work would make a positive impact on my institution.” One faculty member responded as “neutral” to the statement.

Key Differences between Highly Inquired (HI) and Never Inquired (NI)

Of the highly “inquired faculty,” all reported self-initiated insight of some sort. In contrast, half of the “never inquired faculty” never initiated offering insight. The “highly inquired” group employing solicited and unsolicited insight may imply some mutuality and trust between university leaders and these faculty members? Of the highly inquired group, 6 of 10 held other positions other than teaching full-time in HESA program. Of sixteen “never inquired” faculty members, 11 did not maintain another position. This raises a question: Do faculty members who hold other positions on campus have increased opportunities to lend their expertise?

It’s also interesting to note that “highly inquired” faculty reported higher reward for their insight (see below). Eight of the ten indicated that they received “credit in promotion or tenure file” for their use of the scholarship of practice. Four faculty members noted they received “institutional recognition (an official award).” Three faculty members indicated they received “financial compensation” and three faculty members noted receiving “course reduction.” Only one faculty member noted having received no incentive for their scholarship of practice. Institutional incentives seem to foster the Scholarship of Practice.

The “highly inquired” faculty also indicated stronger institutional loyalty than their “never inquired” counterparts. All highly faculty members indicated being motivated to offer insight due to “responsibility” (100%). A majority also reported “institutional loyalty” (90%) as a primary motivating factor. The majority of those “never inquired” faculty top two responses regarding motivations were “no interest” (42.9%) and “distract from agenda” (48.9%). Interestingly, only one faculty member indicated “university leaders would not welcome unsolicited insight” as their motivation for not sharing.

Finally rank and status seems to play a role. The “highly inquired” faculty had higher rank overall, with more associate professors (40%) and full professors (30%) than their “never inquired” colleagues (0 full

professors, and 43% assistant professors). Additionally, the majority of “highly inquired” faculty were already tenured (7), while the majority of “never inquired” were on the tenure track (11).

Implications for practice

Such preliminary results are not enough to draw generalization, but they do raise important questions for professors of student affairs/higher education. First, what can professors do to cultivate opportunities to lend their expertise at their own institution? For those who have been at their respective institutions for a number of years, it appears their chances may increase with time. Patience and strategy could prove fruitful. Consider the comment by one participant:

My answers would have been different if I was speaking about my former institution, where I was consulted and also offered my expertise. A move to a new institution caused me to step back to get settled and revamp my teaching and research before engaging with such opportunities.

The importance of developing rapport and relationship with administration cannot be understated. As most insight was sought through information, conversations, or appointments, professors would be well served to find natural ways to ‘rub shoulders’ with administrators. With relationship comes opportunity and trust.

In addition, professors and HESA departments may benefit from intentional marketing of their expertise to their own campuses. Many participants remarked at how institutional leaders would hire external consultants to come to campus and address issues that they themselves well-versed in. Such efforts could include graduate students, exposing them to the essential socialization required to succeed in an academic career (Austin, 2002). Consider the comments by another participant:

Most academic leaders aren’t formally schooled in CSA, HIED admin, leadership etc. . . . they often lack some (or all) of the background that many of us gain from our graduate programs. Why not tap into the richness of these resources? Why not seek consultations from time to time? I’ve been at my institution for about 20 years now and while I’m quite loyal, I also find myself asking why we don’t work smarter, more efficiently and use the resources we have right here . . . We have experts right on our

campus. But we'd rather pay someone \$X thousands of dollars to come here and conduct an unremarkable program.

Yet another participant remarked:

It is appalling to me how little our faculty is sought for our insights about higher education and this institution. Instead of turning in-house, they readily pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to consulting firms who do not know the culture or history of this institution and do not care and which spew the same copy-and-paste strategies to every institution they consult with. It is demoralizing and disgusting.

Clearly the onus for developing a generative relationship among faculty and administration does not rest solely on the faculty. Institutional leaders can do much to encourage experts in their midst. What can institutions do to take advantage of the wealth of knowledge right on their own campuses? First, faculty are motivated to employ the findings of their scholarship to inform their scholarship of practice at their own institutions through a myriad of ways. Developing clear and compelling incentives to do so would go a long way, beginning with allowing such efforts to count towards promotion and tenure. Second, leaders should develop a habit of looking around campus for help with difficult issues before turning to external consultants. This would likely foster increased loyalty and ownership from faculty, and would save significant financial resources. Third, many participants reported or remarked fear that institutional leaders would not appreciate their insight, as it may be critical of leadership. Leaders can reduce stigma by truly inviting critique and engaging in dialogue with experts on their campus. Consider the experience of one participant:

My efforts to engage in the scholarship of practice at my institution have been constructively critical, and this is viewed negatively by academic leaders. As a result, I have gained the reputation of being 'anti--administration' when advocating for faculty autonomy in academic decision-making. This has negatively affected my career, and I have been repeatedly passed over for internal promotions for which I am most qualified because I am not a 'yes person.'

Limitations

As the study was preliminary and exploratory there must be caution when utilizing results as generalizations. What has been reported should be seen as initial, descriptive, and fodder for additional inquiry. Additionally, only 128 participants out of a potential 700 responded to the online survey, yielding an 18% response rate. Thus, it is difficult to ensure that this is an accurate representation of higher education/student affairs professors. Also, the list of topics of inquiry presented to survey participants may not be exhaustive.

Areas for Future Research

As this was a preliminary, exploratory study, there is much room for continued research in exploring professors of higher education/student affairs and the scholarship of practice. Deeper qualitative exploration of “highly inquired” faculty would likely yield much insight. In addition, the role of university leadership in leveraging the scholarship of practice from their own faculty has not been studied. Subsequent studies could also provide case studies of exemplary HESA departments who cultivate a culture of employing the scholarship of practice at their own institution. Finally, a more refined examination of the impact of reward structures and the scholarship of practice could prove helpful.

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Conclusion

In a recent conversation with a fellow professor of higher education, it was said that “a prophet has no honor in his/her home.” The same sentiment has been said in a different way, “All you need to be an expert in your field is 90 miles and a PowerPoint presentation.” To a certain extent, this appears to be true of professors of higher education/student affairs at their own institutions. According to Eraut (1988), “The knowledge development of potential of practitioners is underexploited” (p. 130). Perhaps professors of higher education/student affairs are uniquely positioned to develop the knowledge of their institutional leaders. From this study, it is clear that it doesn’t simply “happen” by working on the same campus. There is vast untapped potential, yet not without hope as indicated by the ten highly inquired professors of higher education. There are many scholar/practitioners lending their expertise to the benefit of their campuses. Such work is needed, now more than ever.

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