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Constructing a Prototype: Realizing a Scholarship of Practice in General
Education
*Cynthia A. Wells*

Why a scholarship of practice? Toward what end do we assess the merits of such a concept? John Braxton (2003) recommends a scholarship of practice as a means to enhance the utility of empirical research by developing and refining knowledge that improves institutional policy and practice in higher education. In essence, a scholarship of practice turns the scholarly assets of the academy on the work of the academy itself.

The notion engages the ideas of *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990) in a manner that sets a vision for scholar-practitioners in higher education. The scholarship of practice applies the "original indicators of excellence for the scholarly profession" to administrative leadership (p. 16). That is, to "think well, continuously learn, reflect upon inquiry, identify connections, build bridges between theory and practice, and communicate one's knowledge effectively" characterizes excellence in higher education administration (p. 16). As such, the scholarship of practice offers a means to institutional effectiveness.

The notion of a scholarship of practice is opportune. Outlining the specific elements of such an endeavor is particularly beneficial as the notion of scholar-practitioner is an outcome commonly espoused in the mission statements of higher education graduate programs (Freeman, Hagedorn, Goodchild, & Wright, 2013). Moreover, institutional effectiveness is the central concern of regional accrediting bodies (Higher Learning Commission, 2015; Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2006; New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2015; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2013; Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013). Finally, whether colleges and universities are fulfilling their promises is a primary concern of the public (Bennett & Wilezol, 2013; Selingo, 2013). As with all new notions, it is crucial to build a compelling narrative advocating such a vision, clarifying parameters, clearly articulating the connection of a scholarship of practice to previous conceptions, and providing evidence for the benefit of its adoption. Building a compelling argument for a scholarship of practice depends, at least

in part, on demonstrating its utility in specific contexts.

This chapter will argue that general education exemplifies a higher education context in which a scholarship of practice is both necessary and generative. After querying "why" general education is a valuable context for a scholarship of practice, this chapter turns to how such a scholarship ideal honors Boyer's (1990) original intentions for reconsidering scholarship. How a scholarship of practice might be realized in general education, including specific illustrations and potential challenges facing such an endeavor, will then be considered. On the whole, this chapter will construct a prototype of a scholarship of practice through specific application to general education.

## Why General Education Is a Valuable Context for a Scholarship of Practice

A scholarship of practice is particularly relevant in contexts in which higher education leaders are conducting work in uncharted waters. The vast majority of college and university leaders have not been trained specifically for their administrative work (Braxton, 2003); general education oversight is no exception. General education administrators are typically experts in a particular academic discipline, and must learn how to oversee a shared interdisciplinary and/or cross-disciplinary curriculum through on-the-job experience. This requires both considering existing literature and sometimes pursuing one's own inquiry in order to comprehend theoretical frameworks and refine general education programs. The work of general education curricula, from foundational premises to course design to program assessment, is intellectual work, requiring the same kinds of focus and concentration that faculty apply in other realms (Hanstedt, 2012). Seeing the ideals of general education within a framework of a scholarship of practice helps higher education leaders realize the rigor and benefit of this proposition.

General education also aligns with the framework for a scholarship of practice by illustrating how the development of a generative knowledge base guides educational practice and shapes institutional policy. General education design and implementation benefits from knowledge regarding its theoretical foundations, socio-historical context, and avenues to institutional change. As one example, Zayed's (2012) examination of general education reforms in the mid-20th century at Michigan State University identified a wide variety of

factors in both institutional and national contexts that influenced the content and process of curricular change. Higher education leaders benefit from incisive analysis into which models of general education work in specific institutional contexts.

Furthermore, administrative practice related to general education benefits from understanding student and faculty perceptions and experiences with general education in order to facilitate deeper engagement and advance learning outcomes. For example, Hall, Culver, and Burge (2012) sought to better comprehend student perceptions of both the level of importance placed upon, as well as satisfaction with, general education. Moreover, these scholars investigated connections between student perceptions of general education learning outcomes and faculty teaching practices. The contributions to the knowledge base impact not only students and faculty at a given college or university but also help a wide audience of higher education scholar-practitioners when extended more broadly to scholarly literature.

Moreover, the administrative work of general education needs a framework for excellence, which is offered by a scholarship of practice. Building on Boyer's (1990) expansive but largely conceptual vision of scholarship, Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997) clarified these six standards for excellence: clarity of aims, adequate preparation, methods that match queries, results that reflect analytical rigor, effective communication and description of results, as well as reflective critique of the work. Hutchings' and Shulman's (1999) framework for determining what rises to the level of scholarship is equally beneficial. They argue that to be considered scholarship, the work must meet three criteria: It must be made public, be available for peer review and critique according to accepted standards, and be able to be replicated and built on by other scholars. These standards suitably determine excellence in scholarly activities that improve policy and practice in general education.

Applying these criteria for excellence to general education illustrates the value of a scholarship of practice in this realm of higher education administration. A scholarship base in general education that effectively guides practice requires conceptual clarity and interpretive acuity. There are a wide variety of implicit ideals for general education evident in our society and institutions (Wells, 2016b). These ideals must be analyzed and clarified if we

are to comprehend and examine them accurately. A scholarship of practice for general education requires adequate preparation in that administrators must have a comprehensive grasp of the literature, including empirical examinations of general education, national conversations on the perceived importance (or lack thereof) of general education, as well as specific institutional history. General education is incredibly complex; its outcomes include skills and content knowledge as well as qualities and values, and advancing scholarly understanding requires analytical rigor and precision as well as methods that match specific queries. For the results of research on general education to be useful in improving programs and practices both within and across institutional contexts, effective communication of results is paramount. Finally, the scholarship of practice for general education

requires reflective critique in order to improve administrative practice within and beyond specific curricular contexts (Palomba, 2 002). These ideals for excellence must be employed if we are to navigate our way to improving policy and practice.

Finally, general education fits the framework for a scholarship of practice in that it exemplifies how a knowledge base depends on a scholarly division of labor (Braxton, 2003). In the particular context of general education, questions can be addressed by a variety of groups, including higher education faculty, general education administrators, and institutional researchers. Leaders serving in statewide coordinating boards synthesize data and develop statewide policy related to general education in cross-institutional contexts (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, 2014; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015). Scholars serving in national higher education organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities contribute to a practice-oriented knowledge base regarding content, methods, models, and pathways to general education (Ferren & Kinch, 2003; Hanstedt, 2016; Humphreys, 2016; Leskes & Wright, 2005). General education not only benefits from, but, indeed, requires, a scholarly division of labor.

Clearly, general education fits the framework espoused f or a scholarship of practice. In addition to meeting Braxton's (2003) criteria, a scholarship of practice in general education honors Boyer's (1990) initial intensions for proposing a more expansive view of scholarship.

## How Scholarship of Practice in General Education Honors the Intentions of an Expanded Scholarly Vision

Some of the central concerns that drove arguments in *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990) are germane to general education today. Priorities in American higher education were "significantly realigned" in the mid 20th century as the focus shifted "from the student to the professoriate, from general to specialized education, and from loyalty to the campus to loyalty to the profession" (p. 13). In that era, general education models that are based on providing students various slices of disciplinary pie came to prominence (Harvard University, 1945). General education models across institutional types moved from predominantly shared content models to distribution models to accommodate the desires of faculty who valued specialization. Distribution models allowed faculty to teach within their discipline and to have their introductory courses "count" as general education. The problem was not faculty specialization per se but, rather, that this specialization emphasis was overwhelming all institutions. The distribution model took precedence even when institutional mission might have dictated a focus on general education as a shared, interdisciplinary model.

In making the case for this new vision of scholarship, Boyer (1990) raised three fundamental queries that are fully applicable to    general education. The first question was, "Can we have a higher education system in this country that includes multiple models of success" (Boyer, 1990, p. 2). Boyer's concern was that "the research mission, which was appropriate for *some* institutions, created a shadow over the entire learning enterprise" (p. 12). In asking whether U.S. higher education had the capacity for multiple models of success, Boyer was advocating for indicators of institutional excellence that extend beyond traditional research. Boyer's (1990) underlying concern was that campus priorities had become "more imitative than distinctive" (p. 2). General education is too often imitative, adopting models from other institutions without regard for the borrowing institution's distinct purposes and how a general education design advances those context-specific aims. This is not to say that adopting effective educational practices from other institutions is inherently ill-thought-

out; rather, it is to say that adopting any educational practice without the careful, thoughtful effort to do so coherently and in light of institutional distinctiveness is misguided.

The second question, "Can the work of our colleges and universities become more "intellectually coherent?" is equally vital to general education (Boyer, 1990). The concern about whether colleges and universities are educationally coherent is as valid today as it was a quarter century ago. A longitudinal analysis of general education indicates that coherence remains elusive (Boning, 2007). Nonetheless, general education is regularly touted as a means to coherence in today's academy (Wells, 2016b). The connection between general education and the intellectual coherence of the academy is a crucial, ongoing concern.

The third question about whether America's colleges can be of "greater service to the nation and the world" is also essential to general education (Boyer, 1990, p. 2). General education is often a space in which learning outcomes related to service and social responsibility are advanced, and general education requirements enable students to wrestle with societal challenges (Allen, 2006). Moreover, general education programs include specific requirements and pedagogies, such as service learning, that are implemented in order to advance students' capacities for serving the common good.

In addition to suiting the concerns that animated early work in expanding spheres of scholarship, effective general education also reflects the interconnectedness of the scholarly functions in ways that signal the value of a scholarship of practice. The scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching were conceptualized as "four separate, yet overlapping, functions" rather than divergent spheres (Boyer, 1990, p. 16). They were conceived holistically as elements that overlap and interact, not as discrete elements, and are better viewed as an operating system than as a list of disconnected options (Boshier, 2009). Unfortunately, these domains have too often been separated (Boshier, 2009; Wells, 2016a). As such, to create a prototype of a scholarship of practice for general education, it is important

that we examine the domains of scholarship individually but also that we reexamine their interconnectedness.

**A Scholarship of Practice for General Education**

What would it look like to use theoretically grounded scholarship to develop institutional policy and practice as it relates to general education? This section addresses this query by briefly summarizing the four types of scholarship, providing examples and illustrations of their adoption in various general education contexts, and then reflects on their interconnectedness when used to support a knowledge base for effective general education practice and policy.

**Scholarship of Discovery**

The scholarship of discovery is associated with empirical research, that is a "systematic process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting information (data) in order to increase our understanding of a phenomenon" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 2). By its very nature, discovery is focused, contributing to our body of knowledge through a detailed understanding of one isolated aspect of reality.

The scholarship of discovery, in many ways, animates academic life. It contributes not only to the advancement of knowledge but also to the intellectual climate of a college or university (Boyer, 1990). The intellectual excitement fueled by the quest to expand our knowledge base invigorates both faculty and higher learning institutions.

The scholarship of discovery fully pertains to general education and thus supports a scholarship of practice. Genuine discovery in the general education context is absolutely crucial. As one illustration, Mahoney and Schamber (2011) investigated how students' emerging knowledge regarding the value of liberal education impacted their sense of self. The research question alone is germane to general education in that it considers both an ideal associated with general education (i.e., liberal education) but also examines specific learning outcomes related to general education (i.e., views of the self). The scholarly context further extends the application to general education in that these researchers examined these questions within the context of a learning community that linked a first-year interdisciplinary seminar with a course in public speaking; both courses fulfilled requirements in the institution's general education curriculum.

Researchers analyzed student speeches on the value of liberal education, an assignment that required students to read and discuss texts on both epistemology and liberal education. The researchers found that students advanced in their capacity to develop and own their points of view as well as to ask good questions. Furthermore, the researchers noted that students gained "deep understanding of the potential of a liberal education" as it related not only to advancing their career but also to advancing transformative personal change and helping them derive "meaning from their lives" (Mahoney & Schamber, 2011, p. 242). This new knowledge provides insight into general education-related student learning outcomes including conceptions of liberal education and views of the self. It also contributes to our knowledge base about what educational practices and pedagogies advance student learning in a general education context.

**Scholarship of Integration.** The scholarship of integration builds on the scholarship of discovery by extending the meaning and comprehension of original research (Glassick, 2000). The scholarship of integration entails discerning patterns and shedding new insight on research findings (Boyer, 1990; Braxton, 2003). The scholarship of integration involves making interdisciplinary connections, placing the specialties in larger context, and illuminating data in revealing ways. The scholarship of integration often demands interdisciplinary collaboration and requires that the critical analysis of knowledge be followed by creative synthesis in such a way that what is known speaks to specific issues. Moreover, a scholarship of integration shifts our primary focus from a specialist to a nonspecialist audience (Boyer, 1990).

The scholarship of integration is an especially relevant domain of scholarship for general education. General education takes existing knowledge and shares it with a nonspecialist audience in a manner that helps put knowledge in context. General education administration also depends on a scholarship of integration for pulling together seemingly disparate knowledge and methodologies into a coherent educational program. Educating nonspecialists is at the heart of general education.

As one instance, integrating knowledge from the existing research literature with reflection on practice enabled a team of scholars to discern critical themes regarding

what constitutes effective leadership in the context of general education renewal (Gano-Phillips et al., 2011). The team examined general education renewal processes in three distinct institutional contexts that used three different reform methods; the subsequent insights were considered in connection with the broader literature regarding effective general education reform. Three underlying themes were identified as critical to leadership in general education reform: collaboration in leadership, developing trust among constituents, and adopting a posture of institutional stewardship. The painstaking work of examining three different methods for enacting change in multiple contexts in light of the larger literature provided crucial new insights into good practice for leadership in general education reform.

The benefits of a scholarship of integration in a context of administrative practice are also evident in this illustration. Gaff (2007) notes that the work that faculty conduct in leading educational innovation lacks "academic currency" (p. 12); a scholarship of practice that embodies the ideals of a scholarship of integration illustrates the conceptualization and

theory-building that goes into institutional reform. Moreover, general education reform is notoriously challenging (Gaston & Gaff, 2009). A scholarship of practice signifies the meticulous effort of data gathering, analysis, reflection, synthesis, and dissemination that undergirds effective general education reform.

**Scholarship of Engagement.** The scholarship of engagement, which evolved from the original notion of a scholarship of application, entails applying knowledge in order to address societal concerns. The scholarship of engagement draws on disciplinary expertise, connects with audiences external to the campus, and bridges academic work with community needs (Checkoway, 2002). Reciprocal relationships between the academy and community undergird the scholarship of engagement (Ward, 2003); the scholarship of engagement serves the community and also advances academic work.

General education is ripe with opportunities to improve policy and practice through a scholarship of engagement. General education requires applying knowledge to social issues of consequence and teaching in ways that help students engage in their world. In fact, the question of what society needs from an educated person has long been at the

heart of general education (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010; Harvard University, 1945).

As an exemplar, Schamber and Mahoney (2008) sought to understand the civic learning outcomes associated with a short-term community engagement experience in the context of a first-year course embedded in an interdisciplinary general education curriculum. A hybrid design that included both quantitative and qualitative dimensions enabled the researchers to advance knowledge in two ways. The quantitative aspect of the study demonstrated student gains in political awareness and social justice attitudes. The qualitative aspect of the study provided insight into students' capacity for civic engagement. Position papers were critically and collaboratively analyzed, revealing that students' increased "empathetic awareness of acute needs of critical populations" and gained "insight into injustices involving sociological disparities" (Shamber & Mahoney, 2008, p. 93). Intellectual insight was brought to bear on actual student learning.

This work embodies the scholarship of engagement by bridging academic needs with community needs. This research illuminates how institutional practice advances what Saltmarsh (2005) identified as the primary aim for first-year students in a general education context as it relates to civic learning; specifically, students' capacity for civic engagement including associated knowledge, skills, and values associated with that learning is a developmentally and educationally appropriate learning outcome in this context. Researchers' critical reflection as well as dissemination of their findings filled a gap in our knowledge base on civic education in a general education curricular context.

**Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.** Finally, the scholarship of teaching and learning (Boshier, 2009), building on Boyer's (1990) original framing as the scholarship of teaching, views classrooms and other learning spaces as sites for inquiry and knowledge-building (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). Faculty closely and critically examine student learning in order to improve their courses and programs and also disseminate these insights so that colleagues can evaluate and build on new knowledge (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011). Braxton, Luckey, and Helland (2002) delineate the scholarship of teaching and learning as the development and improvement of pedagogical practice. As such, the scholarship of teaching and learning connects pedagogical conversations in and across institutions and disciplinary fields in order to

improve teaching practices in higher education.

The scholarship of teaching and learning is crucial to general education. Teaching disciplinary content such as sociology, psychology, or history to a nonspecialist audience requires distinct teaching models and methods (Handstedt, 2012). Similarly, teaching in an interdisciplinary context requires suitable pedagogies and practices. To be effective in advancing intended general education learning outcomes, such courses need to be designed and delivered differently than if the course were targeted to specialists in a discipline. The scholarship of teaching and learning contributes to general education practice and policy by exploring what models and pedagogies advance general education learning outcomes.

As an illustration, Olsen, Bekken, McConnell, and Walter (2011) conducted a comprehensive examination of an experimental general education curriculum in the context of a large, public, research university. The two-year, thematic general education curriculum incorporated assumptions associated with a constructivist paradigm of learning into the course content, pedagogy, and curricular structure. The researchers found that this teaching practice enhanced student investment in class dialogue and made a positive impact on students' ability to raise insightful questions and make meaningful connections. Furthermore, their study found that faculty posture shifted from a teaching-centered to a learner-centered paradigm. This study illustrates how the scholarship of teaching and learning is critical to better understanding how curricular design and implementation is more effective when based on a knowledge base that addresses how students learn in general education contexts.

Although it is clear that general education offers an administrative context that illustrates the benefits of a scholarship of practice, it is equally critical to be mindful of the interconnections across the four spheres of scholarship and how these interconnections are manifest in a scholarship of practice for general education. The knowledge base associated with the scholarship of teaching and learning, for example, is the product of discovery, integration, and engagement combining as "active ingredients of a dynamic and iterative teaching process" (Boshier 2009, p. 5). Dynamic teaching is context laden; good teaching in upper level disciplinary courses requires different knowledge and delivery skills

than     interdisciplinary

or introductory-level disciplinary courses that fulfill general education requirements. The scholarship of integration bridges various aspects of discovery in order to synthesize what is known, not only to gain new insights but also to communicate with different audiences. And finally, discovery, integration, and teaching merge to build a scholarship of engagement in which students learn to apply knowledge to real-world problems. The interconnections across the four scholarship domains are crucial to a scholarship of practice that endeavors to improve general education.

## Conclusion

By their very definition, prototypes represent some compromise from the realized production design. Proposing general education as a prototype presupposes the need for further refinement and retooling for a scholarship of practice. The ultimate design will fulfill the primary goals of a scholarship of practice, which are the improvement of administrative practice in higher education and the development of a knowledge base worthy of rigorous administrative work.

In laying out a prototype, it is important to be mindful of the challenges associated with general education as an opportunity for the scholarship of practice. In addition to positive parallels between a scholarship of practice and general education, there are shared limitations of general education and the typology. It has been widely bemoaned that "scholarship reconsidered" lacked definitional clarity (Boshier, 2009; Glassick, 2000; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Wells, 2016a) even as it offered a rich vocabulary and valuable conceptual anchor (Glassick, 2000; Wells, 2016a). Unfortunately, general education also suffers from longstanding conceptual confusion (Wells, 2016b). Moreover, a wide variety of scholarly products are devoted to general education; the illustrations used in this chapter alone span from scholarly articles to empirical research, reflective essays to position-taking rhetorical discourse. It is critical to be attentive to precise meaning and to influences of form in moving from prototype to implemented model. At its core, a scholarship of practice revolves around the idea of theoretically grounded research findings being used to develop institutional policy and practice (Braxton, 2003). By adopting the scholarship of

practice to general education, we can creatively identify the meaning and purpose of a scholarship of practice even as we improve the work of general education itself.

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