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Where Is Extension Scholarship Falling Short, and What Can We Do About It?

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Where Is Extension Scholarship Falling Short, and What Can We Do About It?

Abstract

The author outlines six challenges to Extension or outreach scholarship that, in his opinion, reflect where current scholarship is falling short. He suggests three fundamental responses to these challenges: action, leadership, and graduate education reform.

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Introduction

I am pleased to have the opportunity to participate in this seminar on the scholarship of Extension. Scholarship is about creating, synthesizing, and applying knowledge to address the issues important in our world. Scholarship is also about respecting and learning from the knowledge and wisdom of others, our colleagues and the citizens with whom we work. Extension educators are full and essential players in the scholarly process of knowledge creation, synthesis, and application.

The Question

The question I address is "where is Extension or outreach scholarship falling short, and what can we do about it?"

Perspectives

This question is one that I have faced daily throughout my 33 years in higher education--as a graduate student; faculty member with research, resident teaching, and Extension responsibilities; regional director for Extension; academic department head; dean of a major college of agricultural sciences; and director of cooperative Extension and associate vice president for outreach. My perspectives on this matter are grounded in my experiences and reflections during those years, and while they are cast as generalizations, I realize that there are personal and institutional idiosyncrasies associated with each one.

Challenges

I see six key challenges for Extension or outreach scholarship, which reflect where current scholarship is falling short. These challenges are:

1. Achieving a scholarly mentality;
2. Broadening our view of scholarship as philosophy and concept;

3. Understanding the scholarship of engagement;
4. Conducting research on the scholarship of engagement;
5. Developing and implementing action proposals for change, and
6. Developing tools to assess and document outreach scholarship.

Achieving a Scholarly Mentality

Every Extension educator must think of himself or herself as a scholar. We need a stronger sense of our individual and collective selves as scholars, and we need to view our work as a form of scholarship. We must be sure the work we do is grounded in current and emerging knowledge in disciplines relevant to the issues we are addressing as well as new developments in the field of education. We need a stronger drive to continuously reinvest in and renew our personal disciplinary expertise and scholarship.

Broadening Our View of Scholarship

We need to establish a more generally accepted, widely held philosophy and concept of scholarship in Extension and in our universities. This requires a philosophy and concept that fully embrace and clearly define the scholarship of engagement and how it is related to scholarship more generally. Changing our own and our universities' culture of scholarship is the key, instrumental challenge facing Extension and outreach scholars.

Understanding the Scholarship of Engagement

At the same time, we need to develop a deeper, richer, more widely held understanding of the scholarship of engagement. Such understanding involves gaining deeper insights about the craft and practice of Extension or outreach scholarship and how certain scholars come to do their work the way they do.

We need better understanding of the barriers, obvious and subtle, to outreach scholarship, and we need better understanding of the institutional platforms, both within the academy and in communities, that make effective outreach scholarship possible. The academic and civic value-added of outreach scholarship must be assessed, documented, and communicated to people within and external to the university. And finally, we must better understand the politics of engagement and its impact on the practice and effectiveness of Extension or outreach scholarship.

Conducting Research on the Scholarship of Engagement

We need much more research on the scholarship of engagement. We need concerted, systematic scholarly initiatives with such a focus. This work should be empirical, historical, critically reflective, futuristic, and action-oriented. Above all, it should result in proposals for institutional change in our universities. This work has opportunity to reflect the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and education. Currently, there is notable dearth of such scholarship.

Action Proposals for Change

We need action proposals for changing the culture of scholarship in our universities, and we need to vigorously pursue implementation and institutionalization of these proposals. Important topics for these action proposals include:

- Promotion and tenure policy,
- Graduate education reform,
- Faculty and Extension educator professional development,
- Scholarly expectations created by our disciplinary professional associations, and
- Needed institutional leadership and structural adjustments.

Assessing and Documenting Outreach Scholarship

Assessing and documenting outreach scholarship is an issue, but it is not, to my mind, as problematic as many think. Actual assessment and documentation of outreach scholarship is not the "mystery" that some suggest. Scholarly expectations are clear:

- Excellence,
- Sound disciplinary and research grounding,
- Peer review and critique,
- Communicating to peers through scholarly journals and other outlets not only about what we do but how and why we do it,
- Positively affecting the learning and behavior of students,
- Peer and citation recognition of one's work,
- Acquisition of financial and other resources for outreach initiatives,
- Scientific advances in our disciplines and their application in society (academic and civic value-added), and
- Organizational citizenship.

This issue is problematic to the extent that others think it is problematic. There are many models and examples of how to assess and document Extension or outreach scholarship. We need to do a better job of cataloging these models and examples, and sharing them broadly within our universities.

Addressing the Challenges

Part of the question posed is how to address the challenges facing Extension or outreach scholarship. I see three fundamental responses:

- Action,
- Leadership, and
- Graduate education reform.

Action

Action--urgent, concerted action--on these and related challenges is needed. We must "ratchet up" our discussion and action, and resist the temptation to become complacent. Moving the outreach scholarship agenda forward may require that we set aside some of our current, usual work.

Leadership

Strong, vigorous, persuasive, visionary leadership is essential to create sustainable institutional change. Within and across their spheres of influence, faculty and Extension educators; academic department heads and Extension regional directors; presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and deans; stakeholders; and students must provide leadership for the civic mission and institutional change within our universities.

Graduate Education Reform

The graduate education experience is the most important socializing experience for faculty, academic administration leaders, and field-based Extension educators associated with our universities. This experience is key in establishing perspectives on the university and its role in society, including what is appropriate, acceptable scholarship.

In my view, if we hope to institutionalize outreach or Extension scholarship as an integral part of our university culture of scholarship, we must initiate fundamental reforms in graduate education. Above all, we must meaningfully incorporate the craft and scholarship of Extension, outreach, and engagement in the graduate education curriculum and experience.

Conclusion

In my judgment, few if any issues are more important to the future of Extension than the issue of scholarship. It is essential that Extension educators strengthen their scholarship and scholarly practice if Extension is to continue as a viable provider of research-based, non-formal education in the twenty-first century.

Discussion

Author: [Pete Barcinas](#)

Dr. Alter's article is a timely piece that points seriously to a much broader issue that needs to be addressed...succession planning for Extension Educators. I believe the Scholarship perspective for Extension programs is right on track. Perhaps, an Extension Internship piece as part of a service requirement prior to graduation should be touted more. Developing an Extension Educator's Corp aligned to each of the different colleges is one idea.

The University of Guam recently carried out its reshaping initiatives and created a VP position for University and Community Engagement. This is where the University's Cooperative Extension rests. The idea is to bring Extension across all disciplines and tap the multidisciplinary expertise that exists in each domain.

Dr. Alter's article is a refreshing piece that should be consistently promoted. It is a wonder that if you ask most Extension Professionals what they think about Extension their view is not widely shared with other colleagues outside Extension. This is because of the lack or limited knowledge about Extension altogether. However, those that begin to bridge their programs with Extension find the awesome resources, national network that exists.

Happy Holidays!

Pete Barcinas
p.s.

We need to convene a workgroup to discuss this topic regularly. I would be interested in finding out how many Extension Programs recently in the last 3 years reorganized their programs.

Date: 12/15/2003

Author: [Don Schaffner](#)

First, let me say thanks to Dr. Alter for a stimulating title. It certainly captured my attention. I must say,

however, that article itself left me craving more substance. Dr. Alter starts by saying that his perspectives "... are cast as generalizations", but I was looking for specifics.

"Extension scholarship" is something I've been thinking about since I started my academic career almost 15 years ago, but I've been thinking more about it since starting a term on the College Appointment and Promotions committee, where we are asked to review promotion and tenure packets from across the entire college... from 4H agents to basic biochemistry researchers.

From this experience I have concluded that Extension needs to do a better job defining and measuring the quality of extension scholarship, and we need to tell our colleagues about it!

As a way of education myself, I looked up the phrase "Scholarship of Engagement" that Dr Alter used. I was astounded to see that Google (<http://www.google.com>) gave more than 2000 hits!

As a way of injecting more substance into the discussion, I'd like to share one of the more useful articles I found. It was in fact from Dr. Alter's own institution!
<http://www.outreach.psu.edu/News/Pubs/Monograph/eval.html>

I look forward to learning more, and to hearing from my Extension colleagues around the country regarding their thoughts on specific things we can do to define and measure the quality of extension scholarship!

Date: 12/19/2003

Author: Steven Deller, University of Wisconsin

One of the serious problems Extension has is documenting impact. With our campus based colleagues, impact is direct and easy: number of students, grants, journal articles. But Extension is more focused on "outcomes" rather than "outputs" (e.g., journal articles). The University of Wisconsin-Extension has been struggling with this for a couple years now and has made some progress (see <http://www1.uwex.edu/impacts/documents/timeline2.pdf> and the link there-in)

A dear friend of mine at a land grant on the east coast was criticized by extension administration for publishing in peer reviewed journals. The logic was "if you spend your time doing applied research and publishing the results, you are distracting time away from extension." This is a terrible message to be sending to a PhD professor.

Date: 12/15/2003

Author: [Laura Hoelscher](#)

And then there is the opposite side of the coin.

This week, I corresponded with a past JOE author, a Ph.D. with a 100% Extension appointment, whose Department Head does not credit publication in "low tier" peer-reviewed journals like JOE. Raises are apparently tied to "high tier" publication only.

JOE has always been peer reviewed and has become increasingly rigorous, as the February 2002 and 2003 "Editor's Pages" (and the forthcoming 2004) demonstrate.

I sent the author some "ammunition" to help convince the DH that JOE is an appropriate place to publish his work, but this anecdote and Steven Deller's contribution, above, suggest that there are a lot of "terrible messages" being sent to Extension professionals.

Date: 1/15/2004

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