# Scholarship and Practice in Higher Education: What Lies at the Intersection?

Stanley Ikenberry

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

*In this invited essay, Dr. Stanley Ikenberry considers the interaction between scholarship and practice in higher education. A greater reliance on evidence among academic leadership and a greater focus on quality, cost-cutting, and access among researchers would facilitate a healthier interaction between scholarship and practice. Dr. Ikenberry considers assessment of student learning outcomes as an example of an opportunity for such interaction and describes opportunities for individuals to transcend theory and practice and for teams of scholars to draw from their accumulated experiences.*

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## Scholarship and Practice in Higher Education: What Lies at the Intersection?

Scholarship in the field of higher education should intersect with policy and practice in ways not dissimilar to those observed in other professions. Medicine may be the most prominent example with a successful blending of the roles of healer and revealer. But in every profession evidence of best practice is accumulated and applied to enhance performance. Often results are not difficult to spot, even for those outside the field. We fly in airplanes, drive over bridges, undergo medical procedures, consume foods, use products and much more, all allowing us to benefit in countless ways from a healthy intersection of scholarship and practice.

Joining the two worlds in academe, however, has proved elusive. More than 15 years ago Pat Terenzini (1996) argued that the intersection connecting scholarship and practice in higher education was less lively than it needed to be – and even worse – that research in the field had lost its way. Unfortunately, too little has changed. Though one can cite several instances in which evidence and concepts developed by scholars have shaped policies, programs, and thinking in higher education and while specific issues and challenges faced by colleges and universities have attracted attention from scholars, the connection linking scholarship to decision-making on campuses and by policy makers is not strong. In the best of worlds scholarship should inform and guide change. Faculties, administrators, governing boards, and policy makers should seek out evidence and analysis of scholars in the field. Too often those crucial audiences are skeptical, resistant, dismissive, or more often, simply oblivious to the work of scholars in the field.

Today, this disconnect occurs at precisely the moment colleges and universities—public, independent, for-profit, large and small—face unprecedented challenges. Financial strains are severe. The American public, long concerned about college costs and prices, is now beginning to wonder about quality and outcomes – employability for example, and whether colleges are *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2011). A college education is seen as crucial to life chances, and so it should come as no surprise that just as in medicine and other fields, colleges and universities are being pushed to do better. Doing "better," however, won't happen simply by working harder to do more with less; doing better—improving and strengthening programs and accomplishments in American higher education—will come from evidence that can be used to inform decisions and guide change.

Thus the question: How healthy is the interface between scholarship and the conduct of the higher education enterprise? And how might the

two worlds – the world and work of the scholar and the day-to-day life of the campus – be brought closer to make the intersection more rewarding to both?

## Changing Academic Culture: Bringing Scholarship Closer to Practice

One obvious transformation that would energize the bond between scholarship and practice in higher education is a more receptive, attentive, evidenced-based culture on the nation's campuses. Derek Bok (2006) has written eloquently about the need for higher education to move toward evidence-based decision-making and policy formation. So the question becomes, how might *scholars* working in the field of higher education change campus culture and move to the world Bok envisions? Each day, in every state, on most every campus, high-stakes decisions are made, often not supported or informed by evidence or analysis. If colleges and universities are going to survive and thrive in the more difficult times that lie ahead—if the smart choices are to be made—this must change.

It is too easy for scholars to suggest that faculties, administrators, and campus cultures should be the first to change. Of course colleges should move in the direction of evidence-based decision making! But if that transition is to occur, the work of higher education scholars will need to move closer to the world of academic decision-making. Ironically, it may also be unrealistic to expect scholars in the field of higher education to change, although an argument for change from within is the precise focus of this paper. The impediments are real. The "roots" (Terenzini, 1996, p. 7) to which Terenzini referred may be planted in the applied field of higher education, not a discipline, but as with other applied fields, the pull tends to be toward the discipline and fidelity to disciplinary norms and away from the larger, less manageable challenges of application. Funding for higher education research and scholarship is limited and so most scholars also carry significant teaching responsibilities. The net result is a culture in which most higher education scholars work alone, on a shoestring, writing for reviewers and other scholars.

Dan Layzell (1990) lamented: "I find myself having difficulty straddling the widening gulf between higher education research and policy research" (pp. B1, B3). Twenty years later the gulf has not closed. If evidence-based decision-making is going to take hold on the nations' campuses, scholars in the field of higher education must play a part in the transformation. How might that happen?

## The Iron Triangle

Change needs to begin with a shift in the focus of the field toward the triad of overarching issues—the iron triangle—currently confronting America's colleges and universities. Vastly oversimplified, the need is to strengthen academic quality; reduce costs; and preserve and expand access (Immerwahr, Johnson, & Gasbarra, 2008). Seeking gains in all three domains simultaneously may be the greatest challenge ever faced by American higher education and yet that is the contemporary agenda. The pressure to reduce college costs and prices has been around for decades and continues to mount, raising questions about the sustainability of institutions as well as quality and access. Costs to students and costs to institutions themselves continue to rise faster than inflation, faster than personal income, and faster than government or philanthropic revenues.

Gains in opening access to college have been made, but given the changed nature of the national and global economies and the link between higher learning and life chances, there is a growing consensus that access must expand even more, substantially more. And yet, as college costs mount, and as the finances of campuses become even more strained, how will tomorrow's students pay for college and how will institutions accommodate the increased numbers of students should they come?

And what of the issue of quality? American higher education is often described as a model for the world and yet that oft-repeated claim leaves much unanswered. In comparison with other developed nations, the U.S. lags behind (OECD, 2007). While some studies (for instance, Arum & Roksa, 2011) raise questions about the actual quality of college in America, one has only to look beyond test scores. Too many campuses have excessive dropout rates, students in remedial/developmental courses fail to move ahead, mobility and transfer is inefficient, and the list goes on. Bottom line, more evidence on the central questions of student learning is needed to inform decisions of pedagogical and curricular reform, resource allocation, and to inform faculties, presidents and boards, accrediting groups and the American public.

## Moving to the Heart of the Enterprise

At the heart of higher education is student learning. Understanding —assessing—student accomplishment and using that evidence to make decisions has increased in recent years, but even now learning outcome assessment is viewed as a duty of compliance. Mere talk of gathering evidence of what students have accomplished is off-putting to many faculty members and administrators. In February 9, 2009, at the American Council on Education (ACE) Annual Meeting, the National Institute for

Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) sponsored a focus group discussion with college and university presidents to learn first-hand about the assessment efforts at their campuses. During this focus group, a thoughtful president of a public research university confessed his skepticism about the need for more attention to the assessment of learning outcomes, noting his university and others went to great lengths to hire top faculty and delegated responsibility for issues of academic quality to the faculty's safe-keeping.

Faculty members, however, sometimes find discussion of learning outcome assessment downright repugnant, as illustrated in a recent email to NILOA:

> "There has never been a more overt scheme to enrich the undeserving than the nonsense associated with assessment as practiced and even preached at …. Certainly, history is rich with examples of schemes and manipulations of funds which ended in well-deserved prison sentences, but none of those felonies actually surpassed the commitment to fraudulence necessary to sustain the assault on teaching that is the assessment movement. Yours truly, ……." (personal communication, March 4, 2011)

True, the painful passion of this one faculty member may not be representative of the larger community of scholars on the nation's campuses. On the other hand, the work of NILOA underlines the reality that gaining faculty acceptance and engagement with examining student learning beyond the individual classroom and/or course is a major challenge on most campuses (Kuh & Ikenberry 2009; Hutchings, 2010) True, it is difficult to capture the essence of learning in a goal statement, much less measure it. And yes, goal statements are often general and imprecise, and the tools for measuring attainment are crude and insufficient. Still, gauging and understanding what students are learning is essential to strengthening academic quality and performance, allocating scarce resources productively, optimizing student success, and maintaining credibility with stakeholders. Learning is continuous. Gaps and weaknesses at one point create barriers at the next. Gathering and even more important—*actually using*—evidence of student accomplishment are fundamental to the teaching and learning process, reducing failure rates, facilitating successful transfer, and reducing costs to students and institutions.

In a national survey of chief academic officers (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009), NILOA found that colleges and universities were devoting attention to assessing learning outcomes – more than we anticipated. But we could not find that evidence of student learning was being widely used to inform decisions and strengthen performance.

Opportunities for scholars of higher education abound. Evidence of student learning outcomes is linked to virtually every practical challenge faced by colleges and universities from allocating resources to curriculum design to academic freedom and faculty life. Scholars in the field of higher education can attract more support for their scholarship and enhance their impact on the academic profession if they focus more scholarly energy on the heart of the academic enterprise – teaching and learning.

When Terenzini (1996) made his eloquent case for joining scholarship more closely with practice he spoke of "distance education" (p. 9) ranging from correspondence courses to video courses. Today, the shape of the digital age is more recognizable, and it has moved much closer to the core of the academic enterprise. Just as technology has transformed virtually every corner of contemporary society—news and entertainment, commerce and manufacturing, lifestyles, communication patterns and preferences—it is transforming teaching and learning as well. Jim Duderstadt observed that information technology has freed academe from "the constraints of space, time, monopoly and perhaps even reality itself" (Duderstadt, Atkins & Van Houweling, 2002, p. 274).

Yet the digital revolution may have just begun. No campus is immune or left untouched. Technology is being blended with traditional approaches to teaching and learning on nearly every campus. Online learning opportunities are offered by nearly all institutions and some universities are "virtual," offering only on-line instruction. Still more transformational change lies ahead. *The New York Times* (Cohen, 2011, March 21) reported one intriguing illustration of an on-line course at Bryn Mawr College where a "blue-haired avatar … flying across a grassy landscape to a virtual three-dimensional re-creation of the Globe Theater…" (para 1) and students gather to create characters and block scenes from Shakespeare's revenge tragedy Titus Andronicus. Many more exciting initiatives are underway across the country, but we know too little about the new technology and its potential.

In a quite different example, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) has launched an effort with the Open Learning Initiative at Carnegie Mellon University to redesign and develop five to seven high enrollment, basic introductory courses to be offered in common by community college and university campuses around the country. The aim is to facilitate articulation and mobility, improve quality by building in continuous assessment, and reduce costs through vastly enhanced scale and collaboration. Understanding the impact of these and many other redesigned approaches to teaching and learning will be crucial in the years ahead.

To date, the digital age has transformed higher education, but it has evolved in measured ways. As a result of any number of forces—fiscal necessity, technological capacity, successful prototype initiatives, the larger national agenda—the pace may now be accelerating. But what do we know and where will we gather the evidence to assess the impact of the digital revolution and inform the choices that lie ahead? At stake are the fundamentals: who and how we teach; the roles of faculty members and institutions; the consequences and learning outcomes for students; the implications for costs, governance, and intellectual property; and a host of other concerns.

The challenge is less a comparison of traditional modes of teaching and learning with those of technology assisted learning as it is an understanding of the variations and consequences within the full spectrum of evolving approaches to teaching and learning made possible by technology. Some of the technological transformation will be driven by experimentation and the availability of new technology; some will be inspired by successful work of others; and still other change will be compelled by financial realities and market forces. Whatever the drivers, the need for evidence to critique and inform change in higher education is urgent and campuses should be looking to scholars in the field of higher education as a major resource.

## Creating a More Permeable Membrane

Greater movement between the oft-separate worlds of scholarship and practice could help close the gap. Blending the two spheres, however, is complicated. Different perspectives and realities shape the lives of scholars and practitioners, creating quite separate spheres. Successful scholars cultivate a deep interest or focus in a well defined, limited sphere. The practitioner on the other hand—especially an administrator—cultivates a capacity to deal with an infinitely broad range of issues in pursuit of an agenda shaped as much by events as purpose.

As a consequence, entire careers are often pursued in one world or the other. Linda Eisenmann (2009), in her essay "Practicing What I Teach," reflected on her career as teacher/scholar in the field of higher education, and how it informed her work as dean of a college of liberal arts and science. For her, the membrane separating scholarship and practice was penetrated early in her life, when she was still a student at Connecticut College and was invited to join a strategic planning committee. "… I was hooked," she tells us. "…I was seeing that there were ways to study colleges as institutions, to think about their future, to help plan their goals, and to influence their missions. Thus was born this mixed career I now

have as someone who studies higher education but who is also drawn to its practice" (p. 517).

My own career followed a similar path, although my first encounter began even earlier, at the dinner table at the home of a president of a college who was also my father. The college was small, but it had all the moving parts: students, a faculty and staff, physical and financial strains, tensions between town and gown, and the inevitable times of opportunity and crisis. When I left for graduate study at Michigan State University (MSU) I brought that "primer on practice"—however limited and atypical—with me and, as in the case of Dean Eisenmann (2009), discovered there indeed "were ways to study colleges as institutions, to think about their future, to help plan their goals, and to influence their missions" (p. 517).

From those days forward, my life was marked by continuous migration – beginning as a graduate student, then a fledgling researcher, next a neophyte administrator, followed by a return to scholarship, then an extended administrative career, a move to the world of higher education policy, and ultimately a return to scholarship. Each time as I "crossed to the other side" I carried new perspectives and skills with me. My work with Paul Dressel and his remarkable colleagues at MSU gave me incredible access to research tools and modes of analysis that changed my perspective and shaped my career, first at MSU, then at West Virginia University in two separate roles as researcher and administrator, and then at Penn State's Center for the Study of Higher Education. At each step, I brought with me practical experience and a fresh perspective that enriched and informed my work going forward.

For most, however, movement between scholarship and practice is limited. Most scholars do not permeate the membrane. So we might ask: How might we achieve more migration? Not everyone is lucky enough to be appointed to a planning committee or grow up in an academic home.

One low-cost/high-yield option is for faculty governance bodies and administrative units to reach out and engage higher education faculty as consultants to take on special assignments, inform issues, and bring evidence and analysis to decision making and problem solving. The institution benefits, the faculty member gains a broader perspective, and the membrane becomes more permeable.

Looking long-term, the intersection of scholarship and practice can be bridged by rethinking graduate education. Terenzini (1996) makes this point as well and calls for changes. Some higher education programs create internship experiences as purposeful, functional bridges between graduate education and the academy. More should do so. Graduate students should have an apprenticeship in the practical world they have chosen as an object

of study. The setting is less important than the bridge: an office of institutional research, planning, or policy analysis; the office of the provost, the president, or the board; a senate committee or planning project; or an innovative initiative to name a few. The range of possibilities is limitless, but it does not fall into place easily. The bridges for graduate students need to be built, and the experience needs oversight and mentoring if it is to be productive. Still, blending scholarship and practice as part of graduate education can bring new life and relevance to graduate study, while planting an enduring link between scholarship and practice.

Sabbatical leaves might offer still another bridge for faculty members. Too few higher education faculty members take sabbatical leaves embedded in a program or office (academic or administrative) germane to their field of special interest. More opportunities could be created, however, in ways that would enliven the exchange between scholars and practitioners and move campus cultures in the direction of evidence-based decision-making.

Still a fourth avenue to bridge the gap between scholarship and contemporary world of higher education is through alliances with national higher education associations. In nearly every instance national associations of higher education institutions assemble data and research issues and engage in analysis to inform and assist campuses and shape policy. The American Council on Education and other presidential associations (AACC, AASCU, APLU, AAU, NAICU, and others), all have research offices and programs. Engagement of higher education scholars with such groups can uncover issues begging for analysis, offer access to data, and on occasion assist in the quest for funding.

Journals in the field of higher education must change as well by soliciting, recognizing, and publishing scholarly work that addresses crucial issues and choices and does so in language accessible not only to scholars but to lay audiences as well. Editorial advisory boards should be pressed to ponder the question: Who is the intended audience? If the answer is simply other scholars in the field it falls short of the mark and only widens the gap.

## Building Scale and Forming Coalitions

Higher education in the United States is a vast and varied enterprise. Bringing about change on a single campus—let alone the enterprise as a whole—is a formidable challenge. While the study of higher education has grown and matured as a field over the last fifty years, it remains a relatively small cottage industry. Little wonder that the bridges between

scholarship and practice are not crowded. Scale—in terms of numbers, scholarly capacity, visibility and accessibility—needs to grow.

Significant growth in the numbers of higher education scholars is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future, but given today's transformed communication capacity, collaboration across departmental, institutional, and even national boundaries is easier and more feasible than ever before. In many scientific disciplines collaboration and coalition building occurs on a national and global scale. It is easier to move and share data and, as Duderstadt et al. (2002) suggest, bridge the barriers of time and space.

While the tradition of scholarship in the field of higher education tends to be centered on the individual scholar, larger coalitions of scholars with common interests create an enhanced capacity to tackle larger issues and to be more effective in attracting attention and gaining financial support from foundations, government and elsewhere. Increased scale may also garner more credibility and the visibility necessary to attract the interest of institutions, higher education associations, and policy makers.

One can imagine the creation of one or more virtual centers for the study of higher education that might join in regional clusters such as the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC)/Big Ten scholars and/or in national theme-based coalitions centered on major issues. Whatever the means, mounting larger-scale studies to increase the impact of scholarship on the higher education enterprise will require scholars in the field to be willing to move a larger segment of their work away from the tradition of the solo-scholar toward collaboration and coalition building.

## Returning to the Intersection

When compared to virtually every other sector of study within the university, the study of higher education remains in its relative infancy. The field began to take root in the same era in which Clark Kerr rose to prominence. Kerr lived at the intersection of scholarship and practice. With academic interests in economics and labor and industrial relations, his presidency at the University of California was notable. His legacy, however, derives more from his role as a scholar/thought leader in higher education. "*Fired with enthusiasm*" from the California presidency, Kerr became chairman and research director for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and led the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education. The work yielded over 140 volumes of research and analysis. It shaped the national agenda of colleges and universities of the era, and it also planted the seeds of higher education as a legitimate and productive field of scholarly inquiry.

Today higher education scholarship is voluminous and higher

education institutions are larger, more varied, and vastly more complex. Still, it is fair to ask: On what basis will higher education chart its path forward? What contribution will be made by higher education scholars? And how will the intersection of scholarship and practice be made more vibrant and productive? Moving more confidently to join research and practice will bring scholars closer to our "roots" as Terenzini (1996) suggests: "I am not suggesting that the tools of the social sciences cannot be used to advantage in the study of our colleges and universities. I am suggesting we have forgotten how to do that, that we have forgotten our roots" (p. 7).

Reinvigorating the intersection of scholarship and practice in higher education is important to the future of American higher education. A healthy intersection is also important to the vitality of the field. Studies will be done; somehow the demand for evidence and analysis will be satisfied. Scholars from the field of higher education, however, should be in the lead, at the center, and not at the fringe.

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