Is Scholarship Getting a Bad Name?

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This paper offers comment and proposals on what the author sees as factors affecting the future of scholarship in pharmacy. The message offers a different slant from that seen in treatises on the same subject in recent years because it reflects views tempered by a career in the pharmaceutical sciences. The principal thrust of the paper takes to task ideas and proposals which look to correct problems with scholarship either by ignoring the fundamental basis of scholarship or by expanding the basis to a point where scholarship is diluted and begins to lose its significance and meaning. The paper offers a seemingly workable concept of scholarship which combines its unique characteristics and requirements with viable proposals in the current literature and the realities of contemporary pharmacy education.

INTRODUCTION

Two conditions forecast significant change in the way pharmacy faculty are tasked and evaluated. The first is an impending wave of change that will result from an increasing public demand for more teaching and less research emphasis at universities and colleges (1). The second condition is the impact of a large and growing pharmacy practice faculty whose setting is more the clinical environment than the laboratory.

It is disconcerting that scholarship and scholarly activity seem to be a principal focus of the impending change. While this focus may be deserving because of past sins, it should not become a vehicle for changing the meaning of scholarship or replacing scholarly activity with more practical tasks. To do otherwise, would clearly weaken the most unique facet of the academic environment. As has been aptly stated by Carter(2);

“The heart and soul of the college or university is a professoriate made up of scholars who are not just teachers. This is what distinguishes these institutions from trade schools.”

Fortunately, strong voices seem ready to, at least, save scholarship and scholarly activity from oblivion. With the endorsement of the AACP Board of Directors, the Commission to Implement Change in Pharmaceutical Education has recommended that:

“Each school or college of pharmacy must include faculty scholarship in its mission statement and each has a responsibility to foster scholarly activities among faculty and to assess scholarly outcomes.” (3)
There remains, however, a continuing challenge to the basis, meaning and purpose of scholarship itself. This is healthy and needed. But, proposals which accompany this challenge seem often times aimed more at weakening the fabric of scholarship than at accommodating to its time-honored qualities. One can almost see a move to solve the central problem of updating scholarship by supplanting people who are Good researchers, but poor teachers, with people who are Good teachers, but poor researchers. Notions of that sort open a direct routing to trade school status.

BACKGROUND

The current literature on the subject abounds with declarations that scholarship is an intrinsic part and necessary duty of the professoriate (1-8). That same literature also abounds with proposals which look to establish professorship categories that might be excused from some or all of the obligations of scholarship. Certain topics seem to be an inevitable part of the discussions leading to those proposals. Interestingly, the quality of scholarship is seldom one of them. The other topics are generally cited as factors in proposals that would lessen the vitality of scholarship. Several of these are addressed below:

Research. No one can seriously question the view that research has been the principal feature of faculty reward considerations for decades. This is a natural extension of the tradition-bound reference to “Teaching, Research and Service” as the measures of faculty performance.

The unfortunate consequence of all this is that the term research has become synonymous with scholarship. Anyone who has served on a promotion and tenure committee can verify that it is not! Research can be an important scholarly activity, but the minutes of those same committee deliberations will show that not all research is scholarly or necessarily leads to scholarship. The spotlight must be put on scholarship, so that “Teaching, Scholarship and Service” are the measures of faculty performance.

A second point on research that begs comment is the often used notion that scholarship is impossible, or impractical because research facilities are unavailable in certain faculty locations. This idea conveniently overlooks the fact that research, as a source of data for scholarly works, is not restricted to the laboratory bench. Thousands of scholarly works in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and administrative sciences attest to that fact. A scholar will find a way to obtain the necessary data or information for scholarly works.

Scholarly Topics. A faculty member should give free rein to ideas on scholarly activity. Peer review will judge if the activity is scholarship. Suggestions that, “we need to ensure that we do not create knowledge that is not directly applicable to patients and society in general”(4), are ill-advised. This approach to scholarship in the past would have bypassed most of the fundamental findings that are the foundation of contemporary science and medicine. An “applied only” approach to scholarship is self-limiting.

Funding. Obviously, some level of funding is needed for all scholarly activity. Bear in mind, however, that high-end funding is neither a requirement for, nor an assurance of good scholarship. In fact, it provides no assurance of any scholarly outcomes, as a number of ex-faculty have learned over the years. There must be hundreds of ideas, projects and problems that can become the basis for good, ample and, yes, useful scholarship with just modest support. Departmental funding and collaborative projects are two obvious ways of doing scholarship “on the cheap.” It has been pointed out, in this regard, that the vast majority of clinical faculty practice and teach in environments that are conducive to collaborative research needed for meeting scholarship goals(3). The interested scholar will find the means for supporting scholarly activities.

Time. No one has the time to do everything they would like to do. This is one of those truisms of life. There is no doubt but what the time demands placed on all pharmacy faculty are substantial. However, this is a fact which calls for setting personal priorities, not abdicating faculty responsibilities (i.e., personal goals in balance with programmatic goals). It would be the rare faculty member who could demonstrate anything approaching total and absolute commitment of each calendar workday to a teaching and service schedule that excludes time for scholarly activity. And, pleas to the effect that it is unrealistic to expect anyone to excel in all of the areas of faculty responsibility(2), are self-serving. No institution asks that of their faculty. Accordingly, it would seem fair that any move to abandon or redefine scholarship as a factor in promotions because of faculty commitments elsewhere should be prepared to add a suitable adjective to the regular university rank as an indicator of that fact. Medical schools have been doing this for years.

Publications. Until something better comes along, publications are the method of keeping score in the scholarship arena. Publication is the final, unavoidable step in scholarship where quality is the benchmark, not quantity. Unfortunately, there is a mindset that oftentimes reverses that order and discourages even attempts at scholarship for fear of not being able to produce some magic number of publications. It must be that same mindset which prompts the rather ridiculous, but time-honored tradition of citing a single scholarly effort under at least three different headings (Publications, Presentations and Abstracts) within the typical curriculum vitae. Scholarship is not a numbers game.

Double Standard. The current literature on scholarship in pharmaceutical education is nearly unanimous in support of the proposition that scholarly activity is a requirement of all regular, or full-time faculty. This lofty idea is then denigrated by statements to the effect that the evaluation of that scholarship must depend upon the types of faculty appointment and the scope of faculty responsibilities(3,5). No one idea, or proposal has as great a potential for polarizing the faculty in pharmaceutical education than that one. It is one thing to alter the relative amounts of teaching, scholarship and service needed for promotion, tenure or reappointment. It is quite another matter to change the meaning of scholarship in an attempt to include faculty who cannot or will not do scholarly work. As it has always been, the department head and the individual must make the adjustments to fit the system.

Peer Review. Peer review is the final and, arguably, most significant step toward scholarship. Accordingly, it must be done by people in the discipline who have the background to critique the originality and merit of a scholarly project. This would seem to narrow the field of potential peer reviewers to workers whose own scholarly interests or strengths coincide with, parallel, or at least cut across the topic under review. As such, presentations to the local Kiwanis Club, articles written for newspapers or magazines,
Table I. Inappropriate designations of scholarship

- Merely keeping up with the field
- Developing a clinical practice
- Meritorious social or civic activities
- Teaching, if it simply transmits knowledge
- Heavy teaching loads
- Literature, or drug reviews that are not peer reviewed
- Abstracts in lieu of full papers
- Photocopy handouts of tables, charts and other peoples papers
- Presentations to nonpeers audiences
- Outstanding administrative accomplishments and job dedication
- Just plain hard work

and most presentations to students cannot be considered as having been peer reviewed. It is probably both surprising and disappointing to realize that oral and written presentations for many audiences of doctors, nurses and pharmacists fail the peer review test, as well. While such audiences may have an interest in those presentations, the attendees seldom have the depth of background that is needed to judge the originality and scholarly merit of the presentation.

CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP
The most straightforward definition of scholarship this author has seen in the recent pharmacy literature on the subject is (3):

“Scholarship is the advancement of knowledge.”

Note that the word advancement does not mean having or looking for! Other definitions of scholarship found in the same literature vary from author to author (2,4,6,7,9). However, these definitions do present several common elements which might be summarized into a more specific guide as to what constitutes scholarly activity and scholarship. The present guide builds on one proposed by earlier authors(2).

Scholarship:
1. begins when intellectual curiosity, that is thoroughly grounded in an appropriate knowledge and experience base, has identified a topic as needing study;
2. centers on the outcome of a thesis which has been proposed to resolve or clarify that topic;
3. requires that the thesis and its resolution be documented in writing; and
4. reaches its full meaning when that documentation has been evaluated by peers.

It is important to note that faculty cannot pick and choose from among the conditions to find one or two that would legitimize a given effort as scholarly. The intent is that an activity, project, paper, or whatever, is not scholarship until all four conditions are met. Note also that our old friend, research, is buried within Condition Two, which places no constraint on how a thesis may be addressed.

Of course, little of the preceding guide to scholarship is new. University faculty and administrations have subscribed to a similar concept of scholarship for decades. Boyer(8) has proposed the modernization of scholarship by extending its legitimacy to arenas of study beyond just the discovery of new facts and theories. This bold, and long overdue plan identifies four functions which can serve as the basis of scholarship and scholarly activity:

Scholarship of Discovery. The thesis centers on the discovery of new ideas and information. This is research, or discovery in the traditional sense.
Scholarship of Integration. The thesis proposes the integration of existing facts and ideas into new and better understood concepts or theories.
Scholarship of Application. The thesis proposes the application of existing facts and ideas to products and methods of procedure.
Scholarship of Teaching. The thesis proposes methods or procedures aimed at ensuring a better understanding of the knowledge advanced by all scholarship.

The crucial point is that this list identifies areas in which scholarship should now be a possible goal. It is not a list of work or job functions wherein any effort, however extensive or exhausting, is tantamount to scholarship.

The Boyer expansion plan and the “guide” to scholarship are inseparable components of current scholarship. Each of the areas proposed by Boyer are subject to the four conditions which describe the state of scholarship in the guide. Thus, scholarly activity in Teaching requires that: (i) a teaching problem or topic be identified as needing study; (ii) a thesis for resolving the problem be proposed and tested; (iii) the results of the study be documented in writing; and (iv) the written documentation be evaluated by peers.

WHAT ISN’T SCHOLARSHIP
It may be instructive, and somewhat surprising to see examples of faculty activity which the author and the current literature(2,3) see as being inappropriate for designation as scholarship. A comparison of these examples with the template for scholarship described above should explain why these items are listed in Table I.

CONCLUSION
Scholarship is a unique and necessary facet of the university and college environment. It has a time-honored fabric which must not be weakened or lost in order to meet conditions created by newly defined academic roles. If change is necessary, expand the horizons of scholarly activity; but leave the basic concept of scholarship alone.

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