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The Scholar-Administrator Imperative: Developing Scholarship and Research through Practice to Build the Community Engagement Field

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Abstract

Building on two decades of professional experience in community engagement, the 2022 Barbara A. Holland Scholar-Administrator Award recipient, Dr. Patrick M. Green, critically reflects upon his role through the lens of administration (leadership), scholarship, and practice. Drawing from the frameworks of critical reflection and exploratory inquiry, he positions the role of scholar-administrators as a necessity in high education, as scholar-administrators' contributions are rooted in practice and informs educational practice, thought-leadership, theories, and research. He frames scholar-administrators' scholarship as imperative to foster change within higher education and build the community engagement field. In the process, he offers an inquiry framework, including experience, practice, and context, to guide scholar-administrators to build the field by responding to the scholar-administrator imperative to fill the theory-practice gap.

Keywords: scholar administrator, practitioner-scholar, community engagement professional, engaged scholarship

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Introduction

After 20-plus years of experience in community engagement as a social service professional, an educator, a community partner, and a high education administrator, often at the same time, I am keenly aware that my professional experiences were often distinctly separated from educational theories and practices. Adding the local and organizational context complicated matters, yet my work sat at the intersection of theory, practice, experience, and context. Intentionally and critically exploring this untapped third space has emerged into an exploration of my professional educational identity, practice, and scholarship.

This exploration has indicated a gap between theory and practice and between professional experience and scholarship. Living in this blurred space, I have recognized this gap and shared vast opportunities to fill this gap by connecting professional experiences, inquiry, and context, as well as educational, interdisciplinary theories of community engagement professionals, teaching and learning professionals, faculty developers, experiential learning practitioners, and center leadership (Green et al., 2018; Green et al. 2021; Green et al., 2022; Heinrich & Green, 2020). Yet, the questions consistently surface: How, why, when, and in what ways do scholar-administrators contribute scholarship to the field (and how do they find the time)?

Yet reframing the questions that surface may be more appropriate to this dialogue: How, why, and in what ways does the field rely on the scholarly work of scholar-administrators? Given the dynamic and changing nature of higher education, which has certainly been complicated and exacerbated by the global pandemic, scholar-administrators' work suggests a sense of urgency, and their scholarly contributions are essential. Higher education needs the contributions of scholar-administrators, rooted in practice, to inform our work, thinking, theories, and research. In essence, upon critical reflection and exploratory inquiry into the scholar-administrator role (Schön, 1983), I am suggesting the scholarship potential of scholar-administrators is an imperative, rather than an invitation, to foster change within higher education and build the community engagement field.

Critical Reflection on Professional Experience: Exploring a Professional Identity at the Intersection

Articulating my professional identity has been a challenge in higher education. I am both administrator and faculty, managing the Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship (CELTS), a University-wide teaching and learning center that facilitates high-impact practices while teaching undergraduate and graduate courses at Loyola University Chicago. I am

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both classroom-focused and community-centered, as I facilitate the partnership development team in CELTS to foster community-based learning, internship, and community research opportunities and courses. The target audiences in CELTS are faculty instructors, community partners, and students as we work to connect, convene, and build relationships across these three constituencies in high-impact learning courses. I am consistently the betwixt and between, in the gray area, across the blurred spaces, and inside both and in my professional roles. My hybrid roles have been articulated as practitioner-scholar, scholar-administrator (Janke, 2019), scholar-practitioner, and reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983). The literature often utilizes these terms interchangeably. Whitchurch (2013) articulates these professional roles in higher education as third-space professionals. Dostilio (2017) shaped the professional identity of community engagement professionals as the service-learning field became more professionalized. I am all of these labels and live them in my professional experience. For the purposes of consistency, I will utilize the term scholar-administrator in this piece to inquire into the professional experience (Janke, 2019).

Interrogating Experience as a Source of Knowledge

I recognize my approach to being a scholar-administrator is three-fold: 1) space-creator, 2) pathway-paver, and 3) systems-changer. With over 20 years of experience in the community engagement field, my role as a scholar-administrator has evolved into a tripartite approach of creating space for new scholarly approaches and voices, paving pathways for scholars to build capacity, explore, and share their voice, and challenging systems of higher education and beyond. The following visual best represents how I implement this approach at the intersection of administration (leadership), scholarship, and practice.
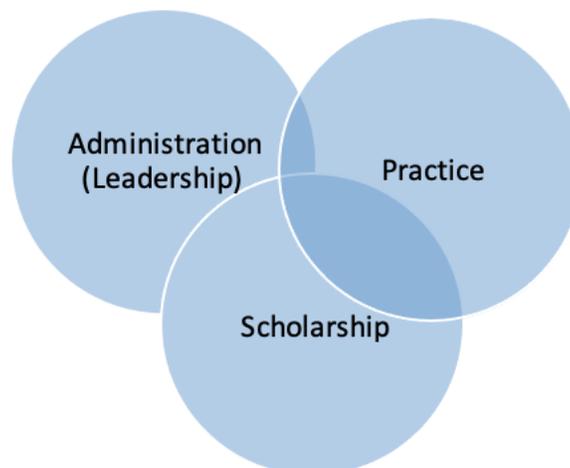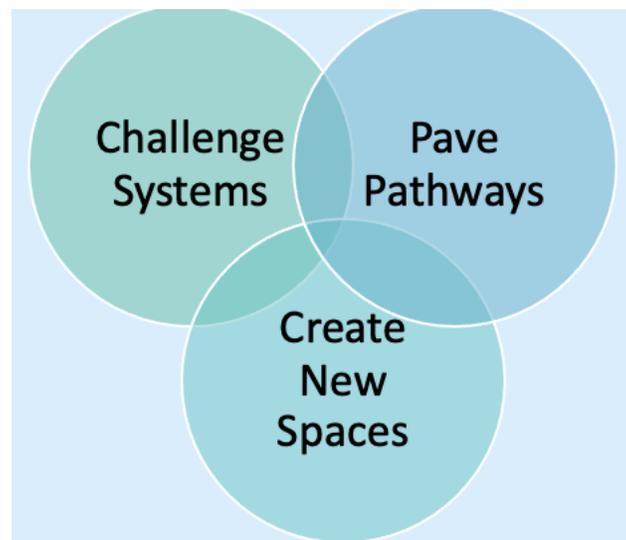

FIGURE 1. Scholar-administrator approach.

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For the past two decades plus, I have served in the role of an educator at the intersection of community-based teaching and learning, urban education, and community partnership. My hybrid roles have been boundary-spanning and third-space professional roles, forming my approach as a scholar-administrator. As a secondary education history teacher working in inner-city Milwaukee with at-risk youth and as an adult educator working in a transitional homeless shelter, my professional career began in community development at the intersection of education and social services. As I transitioned to higher education, my lens focused on connecting the community's assets with the academy's capacity, building community service and leadership programs at Roosevelt University in downtown Chicago. As a Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) member institution, my first CUMU conference presentation in Baltimore, Maryland, in the fall of 2007, focused on my experience as the faculty facilitator of a year-long leadership development series for business professionals, a collaboration between the local business association/chamber of commerce and Roosevelt University to serve the community. The work with CUMU continued to my present role with Loyola University Chicago, which has allowed me to participate in the anchor learning network and lead the anchor mission work at Loyola University Chicago. My work at Loyola University Chicago in CELTS has evolved significantly over time, with the center evolving into a teaching and learning center, community partnerships center, and high-impact learning unit, which allowed me to develop as a scholar-administrator to challenge systems, paved pathways, and create new spaces.

Inquiry into Intersecting Activities as a Scholar-Administrator

As I reflect on my professional experiences, I recognize my role as a scholar-administrator continues to exist at the intersection of these activities

FIGURE 2. Intersection of scholar-administrator activities

I began at Loyola University Chicago as the Center for Experiential Learning founding director in 2007. Our Center evolved in the context of urban higher education in Chicago, along with the community engagement field, to elevate engaged scholarship, explore place-based approaches, highlight critical service-learning with a justice orientation, and position community partners as co-educators. Through multiple task forces with faculty, focus groups with community partners, faculty, and students, surveys, and democratic dialogue, beginning in 2018, I led the transition of the Center to become the Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship (CELTS) in 2020 with support from the Office of the Provost. Loyola University Chicago CELTS had emerged into a high-impact teaching and learning center, as well as a community partnerships center. In addition, our extensive work with faculty and community partners has led to conference presentations, book chapters, scholarly writing, and dissemination. The nomenclature now matched the work and focus of the Center, as informed by the community engagement scholarship. Through multiple leadership positions at the University, the Office of the Provost accepted my re-organization and change management proposals and implemented the new structure at the University. My role as a scholar-administrator informs my approach to utilizing my influence to create organizational change.

My third-space professional role as administrator and faculty member allowed me to contribute to the field-building scholarship while administering exciting new programs in CELTS. Connecting my practice and writing my experience allowed me to present at conferences to disseminate knowledge, as well as write book chapters, edited volumes, and scholarly articles. I write to experience. I write to reflect on my experience. I write to resist the organizational barriers and systemic injustices we all operate. Selected as one of Campus Compact's Engaged Scholars for New Perspectives in Higher Education from 2008 to 2009, serving on the Board of Directors of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) from 2010 to 2017 and the Society for Experiential Education (formerly NSEE) from 2020 to present, created opportunities to engage in collaborative, scholarly writing. Most of my scholarly works are co-authored publications as evidence of my commitment to collaborative work to build the field and elevate the voices of others. It is my intentional approach to building the field by paving pathways for others.

Most of my scholarly work draws on the literature around scholar-administrators by developing scholarly and methodological approaches to building reflective scholar-practitioner roles, such as collaborative inquiry, transpersonal research, and practitioner-scholar frameworks. I created opportunities to support scholar-practitioners development, such as the *IARSLCE Practitioner-Scholar Community* and the *SEE Fellows Program*. I created educational development programs

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on behalf of professional organizations to build scholar-practitioners' capacity, pave new pathways for emerging scholars, and contribute to the field. Rooted in the literature of reflective practitioners, praxis, and theory-to-practice approaches, I developed the Practitioner-Scholar Community curriculum as an online, asynchronous community-building professional development experience for IARSLCE as their Scholar-in-Residence, creating a pipeline from this program for participants to publish in the *International Journal for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IJRSLCE).* As an Engaged Scholar for the Society for Experiential Education, I developed the SEE Fellows Program facilitating a two-year fellowship for scholars that commenced with presentations at the annual research conference and two articles co-authored in *Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ELTHE).*

The third element of my approach to serving as a scholar-administrator is creating space for new scholarly approaches and voices. In the fall of 2019/winter 2020, when I worked with the editorial team of *Metropolitan Universities Journal* as the Guest Editor to craft a special issue on the intersection of faith and community engagement, I immediately brought in a team of assistant editors, including scholars of color. This commenced in *Vol. 31 No. 3 (2020): The Intersection of Faith and Community Engagement at* [Urban Institutions](#), and led to many presentations for CUMU and other organizations, as we featured the authors of this issue. Our work as an editorial team continued beyond the issue as we wrote an additional article, *An Engagement of Hope: A Framework and Equity-Centered Theory of Action for Community* [Engagement.](#) My efforts to generate space for new scholarly voices have emerged in my work with the Society for Experiential Education (formerly NSEE) as the Chair of the NSEE Research and Scholarship Committee, a newly revitalized committee I began to co-chair in the Fall of 2020. Through this effort, I was also able to serve as the Guest Editor for two special issues of *Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ELTHE),* focused on the theme of *Exploring the Relationship between Experiential Learning and Social, Economic, Environmental, and Racial Justice* (spring 2022 issue and fall 2021 issue). By carving out such spaces in the community engagement field, my role as a scholar-administrator seeks to elevate new voices, uncover new approaches and methodologies, feature new epistemological approaches, and develop new scholarship. From book chapters to book forewords and edited volumes, my scholarly works are deeply informed by my teaching and learning practice and professional experiences as an administrative leader.

Scholar-Administrator Sources of Inquiry

The many forms of inquiry for scholar-administrators emerge from professional experience. These experiences may be rooted in the responsibilities associated with a role (positional experience) and the many "special duties as assigned" that fill the minutia of your work day. The

adage "write what you know" is especially prescient here—to document what you know based on your experiences is a powerful exercise. Perhaps your professional experiences have allowed you to build relationships with community or campus partners, connect entities across campus, or convene disparate groups. Such relationship work is hard to measure but valuable to explore. Perhaps your experiences have allowed you to develop unique experiential learning courses or programs, facilitate faculty development programs, or construct co-curricular student development programs beyond your job description. Such experience is a rich source of knowledge ripe for reflection, exploration, interrogation, and inquiry. Here is where the scholar-administrator thrives, and the seeds of scholarly opportunities await.

Unpacking Scholar-Administrator as Identity, Methodology, and Inquiry Approach

The literature around scholar-administrators varies in approach, from positional perspectives to methodological frameworks. In essence, such literature is focused on identity, methodology, and inquiry approaches when attempting to define scholar-administrators. For example, Janke (2019) frames scholar-administrators as an identity challenging to define. Dostilio (2017) establishes community engagement professionals as a professional identity and connects this identity to scholar-practitioners. Whitchurch (2013) frames these roles as third-space professionals in the higher education context. From this perspective, the scholar-administrator is framed as a hybrid or multidimensional professional role, bearing several responsibilities and roles.

Other approaches move the scholar-administrator frame from a positional perspective to a methodological one. Ravitch (2014) discusses practitioner-scholarship as a methodological approach integrating theory, research, and practice. This approach honors both a systematic research approach (methodology) alongside critical reflection and implementation in the context of professional practice. Salipante and Aram (2003) position such scholar-administrators as having an intimate understanding of issues, problems, challenges, and settings with established theories, methods, and research. Lytle (2008) addresses scholar-administrators' ability to take an inquiry approach by theorizing and re-visioning practice, namely by generating local knowledge while interrogating the theory and research of others. The methodological frame explicitly acknowledges the experience as a source of knowledge.

Recognizing local knowledge and taking an inquiry stance is at the heart of the scholar-administrator. The traditional diad relationship of theory and research is expanded with the inquiry lens of the scholar-administrator. Practice is integrated into the theory-to-research and research-to-theory relationship. Salipante and Aram (2003) challenge scholar-administrators to

fill the theory-to-practice gap to create knowledge used in practice. Through scholar-administrators' work, the gap between theory and practice may be filled with theory/research-informed practice, practitioner-generated theory, collaborative inquiry, and/or practice-informed theory (Salipante & Aram, 2003). Lytle (2008) situates the inquiry stance within a specific context, and the approach assumes a problem within the practice that needs to be addressed or improved.

This inquiry approach has significant implications for the scholar-administrator. Since it challenges us to interrogate our practice critically, the inquiry stance invites us to be critically reflective and iterative of our practice. The inquiry approach collectively assumes this stance across scholar-administrators and positions critical reflection as inquiry. Thus, inquiry efficacy becomes a part of the definition of the scholar-administrator, as it encourages us to articulate the macro- and micro-contexts of our work. The challenge of the scholar-administrator is to become a critical agent of practice through inquiry and reflection.

How Does Scholar-Administrator Inquiry Work?

Through inquiry and reflection, scholar-administrators have the opportunity to build from their local context, leveraging and generating local knowledge. In effect, practitioner research emerges from practice and anchors broad inquiry into the specific study of practice. This scholarly approach designs inquiry (or research) related to theory, explicitly connected to a theoretical framework or conceptual model. With experience as a rich source of knowledge, practitioner research allows practitioners to collect and analyze practice-based data that responds to the questions (inquiry) they have articulated. Such inquiry is rooted explicitly in the organizational or community-based context of the practitioner.

There are a variety of approaches for practitioner research or varying dimensions of scholarship from which a scholar-administrator may approach this line of inquiry. A scholar-administrator may approach inquiry as a program or practice improvement through the lens of assessment and evaluation. Given the dynamic nature of high education organizations and the evolution of responses to faculty, community partner, and student needs, a line of inquiry may focus on organizational change or innovation. A line of inquiry may focus on these areas in search of better approaches to diversity, equity, inclusive practices, and justice-oriented approaches. The varied constituencies involved in community engagement and teaching and learning suggest another line of inquiry may focus on enhancing the agency of faculty, students, community partners, administrators, or some other group working in the higher education and community system.

What emerges from the inquiry of scholar-administrators is important for us to consider. Ravitch (2014) describes practitioner research as "the kind that emerges from knowing and caring about people in a setting, the kind that emerges when practitioners take seriously the responsibility to collaborate with, care for, support, and empower ourselves, our colleagues, and our constituencies" (p. 6). Such inquiry work clarifies the problem of practice identified, providing information on what confounds or concerns the scholar-administrator in practice. In the process, it defines our contexts, establishing boundaries, bumpers, and bends to our problems of practice. Our practice contexts become informed by the parameters and challenges we established, as well as the possibilities that surface. The influence of the context on practice becomes far more visible through this line of inquiry. The inquiry of scholar-administrators provides evidence for continuous improvement of practice, as well as insights for effective practice. Emerging from practitioner research and inquiry is the clarification of the practitioner's role related to the outcomes. Mills (1959) states:

> Scholarship is a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career.… What this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work.

This begs the question: What inquiry emerges from your professional practice? What inquiry is derived from your experience? What lines of inquiry surface from your organizational and community-based (place-based) contexts? Stemming from these questions, the inquiry framework below connects practitioner research methodology with the scholar-administrator identity to create an intersecting inquiry approach:
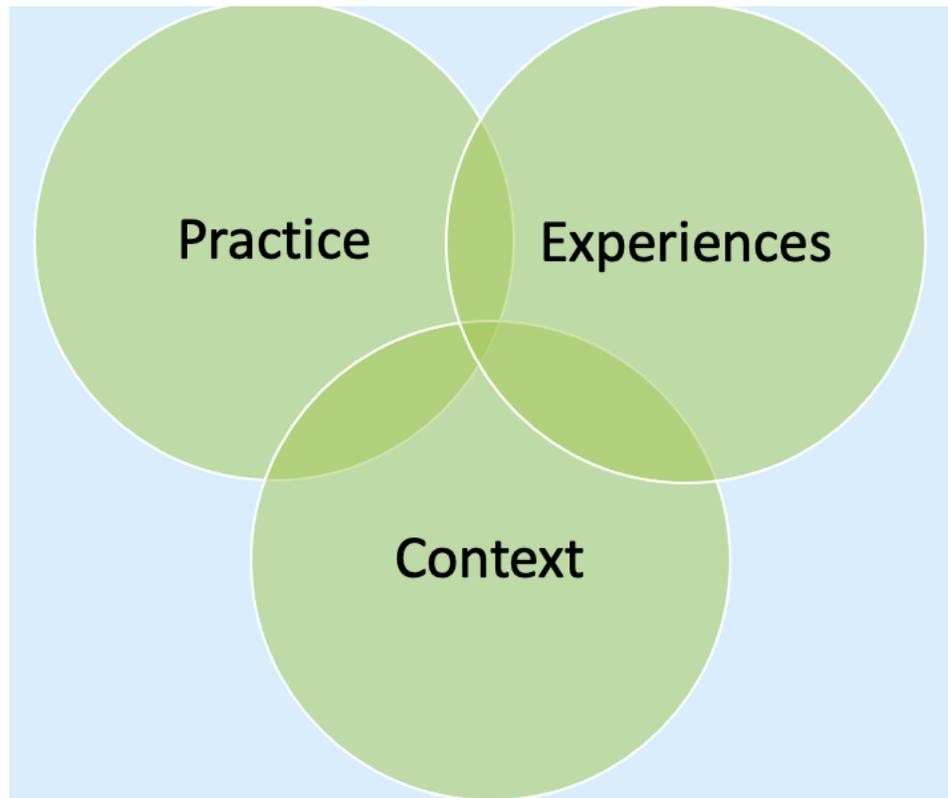
FIGURE 3. Inquiry approach for scholar-administrators.

This inquiry framework may guide and support scholar-administrators to build the field by responding to the imperative of filling the theory and practice gap.

Conclusion

As a scholar-administrator, I am often asked *How do you find time to write?* I see my writing as exploring and inquiring into my work, and my scholarship (writing, conference presentations, educational convening, etc.) is imperative to my work in higher education. Frankly, I write to resist – to challenge higher education to do this work differently, to upset power structures that have rested comfortably for decades (or centuries) on established norms, and to spark change. I turn to the imagination and hope to foster the change needed in higher education. I draw from two articles I have authored, one collaboratively with others, connecting our practice to scholarly approaches in community engagement. First, in *Making Explicit Connections between Experiential Learning and Justice: New Approaches to Teaching and Learning through an Imagination for Justice*, I focus on the imagination for justice framework, drawing from the wonderful work of Maxine Greene (1995), connecting education deeply to the imagination. For if we talk about transforming our community, we must first transform our institutions.

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Developing an imagination for justice framework, we must interrogate all our institutions to see where we can embed justice in our pedagogies, practices, programs, policies, and purposes. In the second scholarly work, co-authored with other scholar-practitioners, *An Engagement of Hope: A Framework and Equity-Centered Theory of Action for Community Engagement*, we develop the engagement of hope conceptual framework that emerged from our work with community partners. Drawing from community partnership experiences within community engagement, we established five themes that scaffold the conceptual framework: challenging unjust structures, the common good, collaborative courage, community-centered, and individual goodness. We explicitly articulate a call to action to re-center relationships in the community engagement field.

To do this work of community engagement in higher education as a scholar-administrator, to truly interrogate our practices and transform our institutions, may feel overwhelming. Sharing a few lines from the poem prayer *Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*, dedicated to Oscar Romero and written by Ken Untener, reminds us that we do not have to do it all at once:

> *We plant the seeds that one day will grow.*
> *We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.*
> *We lay foundations that will need further development.*
> *We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.*
> *We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.*
> *This enables us to do something and to do it well.*

To do something - that is why I write - to change higher education, our practices, our policies, our approaches to community engagement. The scholar-administrator imperative challenges us to think and act differently, anchoring our context, experience, and practices as a source of knowledge that we must explore and interrogate to shape the future of higher education.

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