Reconsidering Research Administration at Predominantly Undergraduate Colleges and Universities

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Abstract
This article examines the relationship between teaching and research at predominantly undergraduate institutions (PUI). The modern day PUI is discussed in the context of Ernest Boyer’s definition of scholarship (discovery, integration, application, and teaching). The authors suggest that a number of inherent structural obstacles perpetuate a culture that provides mixed signals about the research mission, including terminology, application of scarce resources, and encouragement of faculty effort towards areas that may be at odds with institutional priorities or governing boards. Research administrators should become actively involved in effecting some change in the environment that can help to balance the teaching and research missions in a manner that benefits the students, the institution, and the broader community.

Traditionally, predominantly undergraduate institutions maintain the position that while teaching is their primary mission, research and service are, nonetheless, essential parts of the academic endeavor. The problem most universities find in balancing this three-fold mission is that while the priority for teaching remains clear, the research and service goals become muddled. The research mission, in particular, becomes bifurcated from teaching, and mired in continuing debates over its proper role within an undergraduate institution. The result is often mixed signals to faculty on the priorities of the institution.

It is our contention that many predominantly undergraduate institutions send unclear and sometimes conflicting signals to the faculty about the expectations for research and scholarship, and that the reason for this garbled message lies, in part, in the structure of the institution itself. Nowhere is that problem more evident than in the research administration office. However, by rethinking the focus of the research administration office, we can become agents to help balance the teaching and research mission of our institutions and ultimately help enrich the entire academic environment of our universities.

Since the end of World War II, predominantly undergraduate colleges and universities have debated the proper balance between research and teaching. Those debates took new form in 1990 with the publication of Ernest Boyer’s Scholarship Reconsidered. Despite extensive discussion and support for this new paradigm, Boyer’s call for reform has had only partial success. There is a great deal of rhetoric today at most undergraduate institutions about the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Unfortunately, even with this increased rhetoric in support of Boyer’s paradigm, many under-
graduate institutions have not made the substantive changes in their structures necessary to fully implement Boyer’s recommendations. The result of this widening gap between the rhetoric and the reality of scholarship has exacerbated the tension between research and teaching and continued the existing confusion about the role of the research mission within undergraduate institutions.

The failure is not so much the refusal to value a broader definition of scholarship. Indeed, the increased rhetoric would suggest there is recognition of the dimensions of scholarship proposed by Boyer. Instead, it is the inability of most institutions to recognize that structural change must accompany the new paradigm for scholarship.

Research administration offices are part of the current institutional structural problem that prevents undergraduate colleges and universities from embracing a broader definition of scholarship. The failure is not so much the refusal to value a broader definition of scholarship. Indeed, the increased rhetoric would suggest there is recognition of the dimensions of scholarship proposed by Boyer. Instead, it is the inability of most institutions to recognize that structural change must accompany the new paradigm for scholarship.

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**STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION**

Research administration at predominantly undergraduate colleges and universities is often the focal point where faculty roles and institutional priorities collide. Unfortunately, the offices of research administration are typically structured to perpetuate the bifurcation in the institution between teaching and research. The confusion and resulting tension can be seen in a variety of ways.

One indicator of that confusion is in our own terminology. We refer to ourselves as research administrators. We typically call our offices “Research Offices” and the programs we direct “research activities.” Our mission statements often declare that we “support the research mission …” of the institution. To some, the connotative meaning of research is narrow; by using that term, we cut ourselves off from a broader definition of scholarship and creative activities. Worse, because research grants take faculty time away from the classroom, our offices may be seen as detracting from the teaching mission. By using this terminology, we send the signal that our office is for research exclusively, which puts us in the middle of the old debate of teaching versus research.

Besides image and language, our activities and services contribute toward the division between research and teaching in other ways as well. For example, to promote a research expectation, we often create incentive programs to support the faculty. We sponsor internal research grants, devise recognition honors for researchers, and encourage faculty to engage in research grants, even though this activity may not be the critical aspect in tenure and promotion. We also invest resources in infrastructure to support the demands of research grants. These support functions include accounting, purchasing, compliance, and specialized equipment. The sensitivity of resource allocation and of faculty effort invested in research, and by implication, not teaching, can put us at odds with senior university administrators and governing board members.

Whether by conscious intent or by acquiescence to an imitative model inherited from doctoral institutions, research administration offices perpetuate old divisions between teaching and research. The end result is that we contribute to conflict and mixed signals both within the university and with agencies external to it.

**RETHINKING OUR ROLE**

Should we abandon our function of supporting research? The answer is no. We must continue encouraging and supporting research and the scholarship of discovery. At the same time, however, we must seek ways to integrate research administrative functions into the broader mission of the university and re-engineer our offices so that they support all of the definitions of scholarship. We can achieve this goal by redefining our objectives and by making structural changes.

Instead of narrowly following the objectives of promoting research and sponsored programs, our offices might consider a broader purpose for our role within the institution. This broader vision would more fully embrace the multiple dimensions of scholarship and priorities of the undergraduate university. For example, we might consider the following:

- We should encourage the faculty and the institution to use its knowledge and expertise to work on problems facing our local communities. This focus would help research administration offices recognize and support the Scholarship of Discovery as well as of Application.
- We should encourage and support the effort to enrich students’ educational
experiences by engaging them and the curriculum in the research efforts of the faculty. In working toward this objective, our offices would help support the Scholarship of Discovery, Integration, and Teaching.

- We should take leadership in integrating all of the forms of scholarship into the teaching mission of the university by supporting its infusion into the curriculum. By doing so we can help create a self-reinforcing system of scholarship and engagement with the community.

- We should continue to encourage and support the Scholarship of Discovery, but also provide incentives to encourage faculty involvement in teaching and service. Supporting this focus would again allow us to recognize more equally all forms of scholarship and would help integrate research into the mission of an undergraduate institution.

By broadening our focus to include Boyer’s broader definition of scholarship, the activities of the research administration office would change. The nature of the specific changes would reflect each university’s particular institutional culture and priorities. The following examples illustrate some of the changes that might help broaden the functions of a research administration office at an undergraduate institution.

- Instead of thinking of faculty development only in terms of writing grants, research offices might broaden these activities to include sponsoring workshops on writing for publication, teaching improvement, and curriculum development. For example, the director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock conducts a wide range of faculty development activities, such as career planning workshops to help untenured faculty. These programs help to link research to classroom instruction and the use of research tools and technologies in the classroom.

- In promoting a broader definition of scholarship, we could expand our internal support programs. Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville created a new award for faculty who successfully integrated their research into their teaching. It also revised its “Research Day.” Rather than exclusively focusing on faculty research publications, grants, and presentations, it now includes activities on teaching strategies, such as how to build a community of learners, integrating new technology into the classroom, and supporting undergraduate student research.

- Research offices could expand their effort to build or support interdisciplinary groups. These groups could be focused not only to take advantage of external funding opportunities, but also on how to build the effort into curriculum by creating new courses and even programs. For example, also at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, the Office of Research and Projects sponsors Multidisciplinary Project Groups designed to create interdisciplinary teams to develop academic programs and to pursue external funding opportunities.

- Our offices could take the lead in creating new campus partnerships. We could work more closely with the university’s efforts to support undergraduate teaching. Likewise, we could collaborate with the office of continuing education to link faculty expertise with community needs. In each of these cases our offices would work toward linking the research effort more closely with the other forms of scholarship. These efforts would also permit the research administration office to become engaged in the total effort of the faculty. For example, at Miami University of Ohio, the Office of Sponsored Programs was combined with the Teaching Effectiveness Office to create an office called Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching. A faculty development and technology component is also being combined into this office. It has had the effect of reaching more faculty by sending a strong signal that the university believes that research and teaching are inseparable.

If we are to be successful in helping to better integrate research into the institutional culture by broadening the focus of the
research administration office we must change our structure. First and foremost, the research administration office must be located firmly in the Academic Affairs function of the college or university. If it is housed in the Development Area or the Business Affairs structure, it cannot effectively support the broader effort of the faculty. Even more specifically, the research administration office would be most effective when it reports directly to the Vice President for Academic Affairs. It would then have the visibility necessary to carry out its broader purposes. This placement would provide a clear signal on the role of scholarship within the institution by linking the research administration office to academics.

Second, beyond the structural placement of the office, there should be a senior university position that clearly speaks for the “scholarship of discovery” mission of the university. A position such as this adds credibility and institutional recognition for the importance of scholarship. It also provides an identifiable person who has responsibility for scholarship and who is positioned to provide appropriate interface with other university administrators. This separate position may carry a title such as Vice President for Scholarship, or Assistant or Associate Vice President for Scholarship, and which may be a joint title for a director of the research administration office. The creation of such a position would support the structural alignment with the Academic Affairs function and provide visible institutional recognition for this function.

A third structural change that might help integrate research into the institutional culture is the expansion of the functions of the office to include the entire university’s effort to promote faculty development and to enhance undergraduate education. The academic functions of program review and student assessment might even be included in the wider responsibilities of the research office. Our offices then would become Offices of Faculty Scholarship. They would still perform the functions of support for research and sponsored programs, but would now do so in the broader context of teaching and service.

**Conclusion**

In 1978 Raymond Woodrow called upon research administrators to consider “university management for research, not of research.” His often quoted book refers to a broader view of research administration—one that perceives the research administration office as part of the institutional environment—both within and outside the boundaries of the institution. What we are proposing in this paper is continued evolution of this concept: predominantly undergraduate university management for scholarship. We believe the predominantly undergraduate university will increasingly require a better integration of research administration into the university and a melding of the many priorities of the institution.

We can and should play a role as an agent of change in our institutions to help bring our rhetoric and our goals in line with a broader definition of scholarship and in concert with the changes and directions of our communities and environments, however they are defined. In doing so, we would ultimately help to enrich the entire undergraduate experience for our students and promote all of the missions of the predominantly undergraduate university.

Some might argue that research administrators should not carry the burden of “agents of change” and that we alone are not in a position to effect organizational or cultural change. Indeed, we cannot change the organization or the culture. But we are in a position to influence our environment—to effect some change. And that is a responsibility we must realize and embrace.
In addressing the issues of faculty reward systems and what it is that the professorate prizes the most, Boyer wrote that the faculty are “often caught between competing obligations.” The problem, he stated, was that “the research mission, which was appropriate for some institutions, created a shadow over the entire higher learning enterprise….“ What was needed was a new definition of scholarship, a definition that would recognize the rich array of faculty talent and that would better relate to the realities of academic life. By creating a new paradigm for scholarship, Boyer hoped that institutions would be able to clarify their missions and improve the quality of undergraduate education.

Boyer’s broader definition described four categories of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching. The scholarship of discovery, for Boyer, comes closest to what academics traditionally mean when they refer to research. It is basic theoretical research. The scholarship of integration refers to the interpretation of research and placing that research into a larger intellectual context. The scholarship of application is the putting of theory into practice. It relates more closely to the service mission of the university. The scholarship of teaching, according to Boyer, is the intellectual endeavor that builds “bridges between the teacher’s understanding and the student’s learning.”

Broadening the definition of scholarship, according to Boyer, had implications for institutions as well as the professorate. Despite the many different types of universities that developed since the end of the Second World War, a single model of scholarship dominated higher education. The majority of universities came to imitate that model where research was perceived to be at the top of a clearly defined hierarchy of values. These values translated into varying degrees of expectation for faculty in terms of research, publication, and external funding, regardless of whether they were at research or teaching institutions. Simply stated, this imitation created a crisis of purpose for many campuses—a crisis, according to Boyer, where use of faculty time, rewards, and goals did not match the reality of institutional purpose.

Boyer’s solution was the acceptance of a broader definition of scholarship that recognized and supported what should be the unique balance of missions for each college and university. This broader definition has an appropriate message when considered in the context of research administrators at predominantly undergraduate institutions.

2. For an interesting discussion of the need for universities to realign their priorities, see the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999), Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged University. Washington, DC: National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges.

3. There have been a number of valuable articles written on the issues of faculty development. See, for example, Clifford Shisler, Journal of the Society of Research Administrators (Fall, 1995); Mike McCallister, Journal of the Society of Research Administrators (Winter/Spring, 1996-97); and Mike McCallister et al., Research Administration and Faculty Development. Washington, DC: National Council of University Research Administrators, forthcoming.


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