

# Part II: The Scholar Practitioner What Defines a Scholar Practitioner? A Way of Thinking and Doing

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*The purpose of this Developments series is to explore different perspectives of what it means to be a scholar practitioner, the various ways in which one can be a scholarship practitioner, and the impact doing so has on one's personal and professional life. The contributing authors of this series address how they have approached being a scholar practitioner, the challenges and opportunities that accompany their approach, and recommendations for others who also want to want to pursue a career where scholarship and practice are purposefully interwoven.*

*\*\*\*Be sure to check out Lis Dean's discussion questions about this topic at the end of her article.*

At first, when I was asked to write about my experience as a scholar-practitioner I was hesitant. "Who, me?" I thought. When I completed my dissertation and chose to enter the practitioner, rather than the faculty, ranks of higher education I thought that I had to leave the mantle of "scholar" behind. But, then I reflected on what this term might mean, read others' definitions, and asked trusted colleagues for their thoughts. What I discovered was that I had not lost the "scholar" to the "practitioner" in my daily work, but nor was I the same practitioner I had been before graduate school. I had integrated what I have learned about being a scholar into my practice; it had become a part of who I am and how I approach my work. Both the scholar and the practitioner now co-exist. More importantly, I realized that this change was not defined by a degree, a title, or a role, but rather it is a way of thinking and doing. What defines a scholar-practitioner is valuing knowledge and taking action in the local context (Bensimon et al, 2004). When approached from this perspective, I believe that we can all be scholar-practitioners, and perhaps we all should be.

A primary characteristic of scholar-practitioners is that they value knowledge as a means to improve practice, and understand that the research-based literature has relevance for both program and policy. At its most basic, this means reading and reviewing the literature most pertinent to your practice on a regular basis. On almost a daily basis, I refer to the literature in higher education and student affairs to inform both my functional practice in assessment and my thinking about organizational issues. As a practitioner, it can be difficult to find the time, especially as my need to know changes in both urgency and topic on a regular basis, so I make time by reading about any given topic on an as-needed basis. For example, one day I might be reading research regarding the Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) or the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to learn more about the frameworks of these instruments, to find best practices, and to consider how I might use our local survey findings on our campus. But, the next day, or hour, I'll refer to the literature on organizational behavior for ideas about how I might approach a collaborative partnership with an academic colleague. While keeping up with the literature might seem daunting given our daily schedules, using technology can help to sort through the possibilities. Use RSS feeds for online journals through your campus library and set up a Google alert for search terms relevant to your practice. Refreshing or renewing my

knowledge through reading is one of the most tangible and easiest ways that I can connect scholarship to my practice at any point in time.

A second way to incorporate scholarship into your practice is to use evidence to understand effectiveness in your local context. In fact, increasingly we are all asked to do just that as we engage in assessment as an integrating function that bridges scholarship and practice (Mentkowski & Loacker, 2002). While assessment requires some research skills—framing problems, asking critical questions, designing research, collecting, analyzing, and integrating data, and communicating this evidence—it is a practical application of scholarship to a specific context. In fact, a clear asset of scholar-practitioners is their local knowledge of students, staff, faculty, issues, structures, and politics. Understanding the particular, prevalent, and emerging needs of our own campuses and being immersed in our institution's values and missions provides an opportunity for scholar-practitioners to focus on what matters here and now. While not every practitioner is well-versed in the assessment process, committing to engaging in the process and using evidence is something we should all be doing. Even without developed research skills, practitioners can partner with someone on campus who can help with design, data collection, and analysis, and then bring their wealth of knowledge about the student experience to the interpretation and use of that evidence. Boyer (1990) suggests that there are four interconnected and interacting ways of acquiring knowledge—discovery, integration, application, and teaching. These elements provide an excellent definition of the role of a scholar-practitioner. On a regular basis, we engage in the processes of investigation, meaning-making and interpretation, use, and the examination of practice. Scholar-practitioners can span the boundaries of both of these individual roles by identifying, accessing, filtering, and interpreting information for application.

We can all find ways to engage in scholarly practice; in fact we should do them as a matter of good practice. Allow your “scholar” and your “practitioner” to be in constant dialogue with one another rather than being two distinct pieces of your work by reading, using evidence, and engaging others in the process. As our graduate programs face the idea that graduates might not find – or want – academic jobs, we must acknowledge the value of scholars who are educated to value and practice evidence-based thinking. These are important skills to apply to the practice of educating students and improving our institutions of higher education (Milem & Inkelas, 2009). As a profession, we can encourage the work of scholar-practitioners in a few ways. First, our annual and regional conferences are prime opportunities to highlight sessions that focus on both the products and process of scholarly practice. We also need to encourage a focus on data-based decision making not only among professionals but also in our curricula for future student affairs professionals. Being – or becoming – a scholar-practitioner is a way of thinking and engaging in practice. While scholars and practitioners may have “different habits of mind” (Kezar, 2000), scholar-practitioners integrate the best of both worlds—valuing knowledge, using the research process, shaping interpretations, and applying that knowledge to improve education. Such individuals remove the duality of practice and intellect that John Dewey (1916) criticized in education by both “doing” and “knowing.”

### Discussion Questions

How is the role of scholar-practitioner important on your own campus? Who can you identify that fulfills this role? What can you learn from them?

What resources do you have on your campus to help you integrate scholarship into your practice?

What elements of a scholar-practitioner can you identify in your own work? How might you add to that repertoire to improve your practice?

How might we, as a profession, help to recognize and support the work of scholar-practitioners in student affairs and higher education (e.g., professional development, etc.)?

*Please send inquiries and feedback to Kathleen Lis Dean at [kdean@jcu.edu](mailto:kdean@jcu.edu).*

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