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Rethinking Scholarship: Implications for the Nursing Academic Workforce

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Introduction

It is a widely acknowledged fact that the academic nursing workforce is aging and dwindling and in need of replenishment (Hall 2009; Price 2009). This concern has been the driving force behind a number of reviews and taskforces internationally, resulting in a number of reports and recommendations which seek to provide nationally coherent strategies related to nursing and academic nursing workforces (NNNET 2006; UKDOH 2006; Finch 2007). Many of these strategies focus on encouraging nurses into research careers, largely because university and government priorities dictate this direction. It is our contention however, that an overemphasis on fitting nursing schools too slavishly into the 'traditional' forms and structures of academic research has proven, and will continue to prove, problematic for the replenishment of the nurse academic workforce, and for the quality of nursing programs and their graduates. More innovative and dynamic ways of thinking about the work that nursing schools do are needed if we wish to provide truly rewarding career pathways. This is not a problem at all unique to nursing, and has been the subject of debate in wider academic circles for some time.

This paper discusses the relevance of the work on 'reconsidering scholarship' of Ernest L. Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation to suggest ways in which nursing schools, and universities more generally, can broaden the base of their scholarly activity and reward their staff accordingly. The paper shows how these ideas underpin the development of a project being undertaken at the University of Wollongong which is an attempt to rethink the way scholarship is conceptualised, in order to attract new staff, and better retain and reward the ones we have, across the range of activities that universities are involved in. Thus, the project looks to put in place long term sustainable solutions that meet the needs of students, academics, institutions and professions as a whole. This paper discusses how these ideas are relevant to a school of nursing, but can be applied across a whole university.

Background

Recent debate in the health policy area has generated a plethora of models, programs and schemes stressing the need to increase recruitment and to improve career pathways for nurses as incentives for them to remain in the profession. In Australia, government reports have sought to address basic workforce issues, pre and post-registration education and training, research priorities and academic pathways through the development of strategic frameworks and action plans (Bennett 2002; NNNET 2003). These are complemented by an array of organisational reports that tease out specific issues in relation to research, practice and education (CDNM 2006; Preston 2006).

In recent years in the UK, programs for addressing workforce issues have centred around the concept of 'modernising nursing careers'. Emerging initially from the Scottish Executive, but designed to provide a coherent national program, the "modernising nursing careers" project sought to "develop a competent and flexible nursing workforce; update career pathways and career choices; prepare nurses to lead in a changed health care system and modernise the image of nursing and nursing careers" (UKDOH 2006: p17). The UK Committee on Clinical Research prepared its own report in collaboration with modernising nursing careers called "Developing the Best Research Professionals" (known as the Finch report), focusing on improving *clinical* academic career pathways through a structured education, training and research program (Finch 2007). This report makes specific recommendations to government and higher education providers about educational pathways from undergraduate, to Masters and Doctoral studies and on to Postdoctoral and Senior Clinical Academic Fellowships in order to develop a new generation of research active clinical academics (Finch 2007: 6).

These programs being developed and debated in the UK stress the importance of improving pathways into research and clinical academic careers as one way of raising the profile of the profession. It is also argued that these 'modernising' kinds of programs will help recruit and keep nurses in the profession, create a new generation of research minded nurse leaders, and generate evidence based research about nursing practice (Finch 2007).

While there is an underlying recognition here that getting nurses into academic careers and developing career pathways once there is an extremely fraught enterprise, it is the case that these schemes are primarily designed to develop *research capacity* as research is defined within the traditional academic university setting. There is no doubt that every endeavour should be made to encourage nurses and nursing scholars/academics to undertake original research, but this is not the only form of scholarly activity which nurse educators and academics undertake, or that nursing schools are required to provide. A potential framework for the encouragement and rewarding of a broader range of scholarly activities, which have the potential to provide more flexible career pathways, has already been developed by the Carnegie Foundation, and has come to be known under the rubric of 'Scholarship Reconsidered' (Boyer 1996).

Scholarship Reconsidered

We are not the first to consider Ernest Boyer's ideas about 'rethinking scholarship' for nursing academia. They have been the subject of some debate in the pages of NET and NEP themselves, which give thoughtful consideration to the role of scholarship for nursing as an academic discipline (Watson and Thompson 2008; Rolfe 2009b; Thompson 2009). This paper suggests that Boyer's ideas can be very useful in that they may help nursing schools, as whole units, bridge the gap between research and teaching requirements, and in so doing improve quality in both research and teaching, and provide flexible career pathways for nursing academics.

Despite this potential, it is safe to say that Boyer's ideas have not been as largely adopted in nursing schools as they have been in more 'traditional' academic disciplines (Boyer 1996: p133; O'Meara and Rice 2005), and that where these ideas have found purchase they have done so in the USA rather than the UK or Australia. One particular example is the School of Nursing at the University of Kansas, where since April 2005, school appointments have been made to one of four scholarship tracks in line with the four types of scholarly activity elaborated by Boyer. To some, this may look like a dangerous activity, potentially reviving the teaching versus research debate, but this would be to misunderstand Boyer's own intentions.

Rather than privileging research activity and outcomes over teaching activity and outcomes in universities, Boyer argues for a broader definition of scholarship that would help to form connections between research and teaching, between theory and practice, in ways that are mutually enhancing. In 1990 Boyer argued that a broader approach to academic work "might be thought of as having four separate, yet overlapping, functions. These are: the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching." (Boyer 1990: 16). While these are presented as separate functions, Boyer argues that they *overlap* and are intrinsically connected. Good thorough scholarship is all of these things all at once, it is from the relationship between these spheres that a rigorous academic discipline is built, so that the discovery and generation of new knowledge flows through and is integrated into learning and then applied in practice, which in turn flows back into teaching and research. This is not a linear process but a circular one.

However, Boyer does not mean that a single individual must, or even can, fulfil or excel in all of these functions. In fact, in his surveys he found it was this very level of expectation that caused so much dissatisfaction in faculty staff, who felt they were under too much pressure, and not well enough resourced, to excel in anything (Boyer 1990; O'Meara and Rice 2005: 316). He argued rather that institutions need to think about the way they structure their activities so that all of these functions are encouraged and that the people who facilitate them are rewarded, whatever function/s they operate within (Boyer 1990). This requires rethinking how scholarship itself is defined, including a broadening of the notion of what constitutes 'scholarly' activity. While Boyer argues that the scholarship of discovery, that is, "the ability to conduct original research, study a serious intellectual problem, and present to colleagues the results" (1990: 27) remains central, this is not the only way by which faculty members can be rewarded for scholarly activity, or the only way in which scholarship can be defined. He argues that the existing focus on research through traditional outcomes, such as journal publications or funding grants, has narrowed the definition of scholarship, and thus narrowed the career pathways for those wishing to be taken seriously in their faculties. It does not account for the scholarly activity inherent to teaching, or in the integration and application of research, for example curriculum design or Practice Development. Instead, he argued that "what we urgently need today

is a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar - recognition that knowledge is acquired [and shared] through research, through synthesis, through practice and through teaching" (Boyer 1990: p25).

In his articulation of these four types of scholarship, Boyer sparked a deal of debate about how such a system might be operationalised, and how new definitions of scholarship might be assessed (Boyer 1996: p133). In the 1997 report *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate* (Glassick et al 1997), Boyer's colleagues elaborated an assessment and evaluation methodology by which to measure and reward staff success across the four functions of scholarship. A complex matrix of criteria has been elaborated to help faculties structure their activities and to ensure quality and fairness in reward and promotion systems where the new definitions have been adopted (Glassick et al 1997), but it can not be applied wholesale, and needs to be considered in the context of particular schools and their local contexts and requirements.

Rethinking Scholarship at UOW

A program building on these principles is in the initial development stages at the University of Wollongong in Australia. In early 2009, in an attempt to promote excellence in teaching and learning, UOW developed an information kit entitled "Academic promotion: A guide to evidence about teaching - Applicants ranking teaching highly" (UOW 2009). This document sets out a matrix of performance criteria and assessment and evaluation tools for staff who wish to apply for probation or promotion on the grounds of their teaching performance. It includes some criteria that have an affinity with the work of Boyer; in particular applicants can provide information about their activities in curriculum development, in leadership, in the teaching-learning-research nexus and in the scholarship of teaching. Our project seeks to expand on this set of criteria using the framework developed by Boyer, and to create similar matrices for staff wishing to apply for probation or promotion but ranking other scholarly activities, like integration, application or community engagement, highly.

Our aim here is not to supersede existing systems, but to overlay Boyer's four types of scholarship with existing academic functions as they are commonly categorised in the

Australian university system: research, teaching, governance and community engagement. By so doing, we hope to develop an expanded and more flexible set of performance measures which will ensure that good staff across all types of scholarly activities are appropriately rewarded. Our objective is that schools and faculties may be more easily able to promote worthy scholarly staff, not only those who engage in the scholarship of discovery, and therefore create a more equitable and realistic academic working environment and workforce. This is the case in a number of the faculty and school restructurings already undertaken in the US, which include re-categorising forms of scholarly excellence across discovery, teaching and integration at a socially diverse campus (O'Meara and Rice 2005: 112); finding ways to reward scholarly activity in clinical teachers at a medical school (O'Meara and Rice 2005: 230) and expanding the criteria for promotion and tenure at a research intensive university to ensure quality teaching (O'Meara and Rice 2005: 220-221).

While this is a project that emerged from the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Indigenous Health at UOW, it has attracted attention across the university, and across other tertiary institutions. It has proven particularly interesting to other health profession disciplines because of the large amount of community engagement work that staff are involved in, and for which they are consistently not rewarded. At UOW, we are in the process of establishing an expert group to set the terms of reference for the project and will be running focus groups and interviews across all the university's faculties. The objective here is that nursing as a discipline will be active in refining its own agenda, and be at the forefront of academic leadership more broadly. This in itself is significant scholarly activity.

Conclusion

While nursing as an academic discipline can and should be concerned with the generation of new research about nursing practice, this is meaningless if it is not integrated into teaching and learning, and thence to clinical practice, and this must be an active process. It will not happen by itself. Rethinking the criteria by which nursing faculty are evaluated and promoted will help to create more flexible career pathways, will make the most of the work that nursing faculty already do, and will create an environment that will look attractive to people who may otherwise have felt an academic career was not for them. Most importantly, it will ensure that nursing

schools can meet the needs of all of their stakeholders: staff, students, universities and ultimately, the profession itself.

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