

## **THE SCHOLARSHIP OF eXtension**

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### **ABSTRACT**

eXtension ([www.extension.org](http://www.extension.org)) is an interactive on-line learning environment delivering "best of the best" researched-based knowledge from the top minds across the land-grant university system. Work done in the eXtension environment is complex and challenging, as top faculty and professional minds collaborate virtually to develop educational works that best serve the needs of our clientele. Successful scholarly works are products of top content minds, vetted by Communities of Practice (CoP) members. The focus of this paper is to discuss the multifaceted scholarly aspects of work done by faculty and other professionals in the eXtension environment. Included are guidelines on the scholarship of eXtension and how one institution is valuing the work done in eXtension as scholarship.

**Keywords:** Scholarship, eXtension

### **INTRODUCTION**

eXtension ([www.extension.org](http://www.extension.org)) is an interactive on-line learning environment delivering "best of the best" researched-based knowledge from the top minds across the land-grant university system. It is a space where university content providers can collaborate to gather and produce new educational and information resources on wide-ranging topics while continually interacting with their customers to help solve real-life problems in real time. The works of faculty and other professionals in eXtension are based upon unbiased research and undergo a peer review process prior to publication on the public interface. The focus of this paper is to discuss and provide guidelines for the multifaceted scholarly aspects of work done by faculty and other professionals in the eXtension environment.

## **THE SCHOLARSHIP OF COLLABORATION**

Work done in the eXtension environment is complex and challenging, as top faculty and professional minds collaborate virtually to develop educational works that best serve the needs of our clientele. Successful scholarly works are products of top content minds, vetted by Communities of Practice (CoP) members. These works will continue to evolve as new research-based knowledge is discovered and utilized.

A cornerstone of content creation in the eXtension environment is collaboration by faculty and other professionals to jointly develop materials in a group effort. This is a major paradigm shift for university academics, moving from a “me” to “we” environment. In this setting of teamwork, it is recognized that numerous content experts jointly working on educational materials produce more in depth and higher quality products for the public. Collaboration by communities of experts in content creation produces the “best of the best” educational materials and programs for customers.

With input over time from these experts, the content also evolves, as appropriate, as research-based information is tested and modified over a wide array of practical environments and situations. Institutions supported by public tax dollars have an obligation to the public to provide the best products and programs possible. The scholarship of collaboration allows reduction of duplication of effort nationwide, a more open and sharing environment for material development, and a higher quality, more in depth, vetted product for the public.

In a collaborative setting, content is approached from many perspectives, agreed upon, and then peer reviewed. The scholars involved must have content expertise, be willing to explore other perspectives, evaluate arguments presented, and reach consensus. Contributions in this environment are more difficult to document, but perhaps more significant as the scholarly products are the result of many top intellectual minds in that specific content area, not just one.

## **THE SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT**

Another important aspect of eXtension is the continual interaction of faculty and professionals who serve in a variety of roles within their CoP as they interact with their respective Communities of Interest (CoI) -- their customers or clientele. Much of the contemporary discourse on the engaged university was prompted by the writings of Ernest Boyer. In a synopsis of Boyer’s work, the Clearinghouse & National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement (2007) summarized that,

*Boyer suggests that American education has moved away from its traditional commitment to public service and argues for a new commitment to service that he calls the scholarship of engagement. He describes a new paradigm of scholarship (as articulated in a Carnegie Foundation report entitled *Scholarship Reconsidered*) that assigns four "interlocking functions" to the professoriate. The first, scholarship of discovery, is basic research, pushing back the frontiers of human knowledge. The scholarship of integration involves placing discoveries within a larger context and initiating more interdisciplinary conversations leading to a new paradigm of knowledge. The scholarship of sharing knowledge recognizes the communal nature of scholarship*

*and also recognizes other audiences for scholarship than the scholar's peers. Finally, the report calls for the application of knowledge as a reflective practice in which theory and practice inform each other.*

From an Extension perspective, engagement is related to what we have always done and eXtension adds additional dimensions for engagement. However, the aspect that is perhaps new, or at least adds an additional perspective, is the notion of scholarship, and more specifically the scholarship of engagement.

## **ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOLARSHIP**

A simple form of engagement in Extension is to provide advice to individuals and groups on a specific problem. Relationships are formed and ongoing trust is established. Richer and more robust interaction and forms of educational products and programs are explored and shared with clients as the engagement continues. In the eXtension environment, this engagement occurs in an on-line environment which customers' access at any time, from any place, in multiple formats, and on many devices.

When theory and practice come together, engagement becomes scholarly. This involves a more focused, ongoing, collaborative working relationship with clientele that results in producing both public goods (results) and scholarly products (peer reviewed and publicly disseminated publications). According to Peters (2005:419):

*What is important to recognize is that the process of engagement can lead to scholarly products of high quality that communicate original, innovative knowledge and theoretical insights that could not have been produced without engagement.*

In addition, Alter (2005:470-471) states:

*To be taken seriously as scholarship, faculty must successfully pass through the filter of peer review and evaluation. The same process should apply in the case of public scholarship. What specific evidence of scholarly contribution should we expect to see for faculty involved in public scholarship? Fundamentally, we need to see evidence of scholarly excellence through engagement. I think, by and large, we can look for the same evidence we typically expect: educational initiatives grounded in current and emerging science; innovation and creativity in teaching, specifically educational program development and design, teaching methods, and educational support materials; significant, positive impact on student learning and behavior; coherent, productive research programs that make important contributions along the knowledge continuum, as evidenced by a robust and continuous stream of peer-reviewed, scholarly publications; participation, though attendance and making presentations at professional, technical, and scholarly meetings; regular publication in professional, popular, and non-peer reviewed publications and outlets; acquisition, sustained over time, of external funding to support education and research programs; participation in departmental and university governance; and service contributions to one's profession and the public.*

Thus engagement as scholarship involves a more purposeful approach than just simple engagement, with the expectation of producing scholarly products.

## **EVALUATION CRITERIA FOR THE SCHOLARSHIP OF eXtension**

With this perspective of scholarship in mind, we offer a set of evaluation criteria to assist in determining the extent to which eXtension work can be considered scholarly collaboration and engagement. These criteria were adapted from the Clearinghouse & National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement (2007). The more criteria that are met results in a stronger form of collaboration and engagement scholarship. In applying these criteria, one should be mindful of the variation in institutional contexts, the breadth of faculty work, and individual promotion and tenure guidelines.

### **Criteria for scholarly collaboration and engagement**

#### **Objectives/questions**

- The basic purpose of the work and its value for the public good is stated.
- There is an "academic fit" with the individual's role, department, Extension, and university mission.
- Objectives are defined that are realistic and achievable.

#### **Context of theory, literature, "best practices"**

- The individual shows an understanding of relevant existing scholarship in the work.
- The individual brings the necessary skills to the collaboration.
- The individual makes significant contributions to the work and identifies his/her specific contributions.
- The work is intellectually compelling.

#### **Methods**

- The individual uses methods appropriate to the objectives, questions, and context of the work.
- The individual describes a rationale for selection of methods in relation to the context and issue.
- The individual modifies procedures in response to changing circumstances, if necessary.

#### **Results**

- The work meets its objectives and impact is documented.
- The work contributes to the discipline and to the community.
- The work opens additional areas for further exploration and collaboration.

### **Communication/dissemination**

- The individual uses a suitable style and effective organization to present the work.
- The individual communicates/disseminates the work to appropriate academic (peer reviewed), Extension, and public audiences consistent with the mission of the institution.
- The individual uses appropriate forums for communicating the work to the intended audience.

### **Reflective critique**

- The individual critically evaluates the work.
- The individual brings an appropriate breadth of evidence to the critique.
- The community is involved in the critique.
- The individual uses evaluation to learn from the work and to direct future work.
- The individual is involved in a local, state, and national dialogue related to the work.

### **SCHOLARLY WORK BY eXtension COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

Given the above, the following list provides examples of scholarly work conducted by eXtension Communities of Practice.

- Development of science-based content in a specified area occurs within and between CoPs.
- CoPs are scholarly in design by bringing together inclusively the top minds of a particular content area to work collaboratively to develop the best educational products and programs nationally, thus reducing duplication of efforts across the system.
- CoPs function similar to a professional journal in that information is "published" only after review by peers.
- CoP leaders function as journal editors by inviting participation and contributions and by facilitating scholarly review.
- Author teams are developed in specific content areas to develop the "best of the best" content for public publication.
- Faculty content reviewers (minimum of two reviewers per article).
- Journalist review for language, educational design, content design.
- Articles accepted for publication.
- CoP membership is open to all and is national in scope.
- True collaborative effort of top faculty in various disciplines and content areas.
- Individual contributions tracked through the technology applications.
- Cross pollination of content development due to multidisciplinary teams.
- Tracking utilization of public content to help determine scope of outreach.

## **INDIVIDUAL FACULTY SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS TO A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE**

The following list provides specific examples of scholarly contributions that may be made by CoP members from participating in eXtension.

- National and regional leadership roles (e.g., CoP leader, content team leader, national reviewer, national eXtension content management board member).
- Publication of peer reviewed content in eXtension as lead author or as a contributing author.
- Working across CoPs as a contributing author and/or reviewer.
- International, national and regional recognition for expertise and contributions.
- Professional presentations on behalf of their CoP.
- Publications in professional journals on behalf of the CoP.
- On-line professional papers to peers via web conferencing.
- On-line professional presentations to clientele.
- Invited web cast speaker or pod-cast speaker.
- Author of blog sites, webinars, chats, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media within content expertise area.
- High quality interaction with CoI via Ask an Expert.

## **HOW ONE INSTITUTION VALUES WORK IN eXtension AS SCHOLARSHIP**

Utah State University recently developed the following guidelines to give proper scholarship weight and credit to eXtension activities its faculty contributed to or participated in.

- Ask An Expert – each answered question should be considered as a contact.
- FAQ – each accepted FAQ should be considered equivalent to an encyclopedia entry.
- Review of a FAQ - requests for a review should be considered equivalent to a review of an encyclopedia entry.
- Content page – each accepted content page should be considered equivalent to an Extension fact sheet.
- Revision of a content page – each revision should be considered equivalent to the revision of an encyclopedia entry.
- Review of a content page – requests for a review should be considered equivalent to a review of a journal manuscript.
- Co-leader/leader of a Community of Practice – this occurs after the Community of Practice has been developed, and includes responsibilities for revisions and up-dates. This should be considered equivalent to being a member of an editorial board or a co-editor of a journal.
- Development of a Community of Practice – this is considered equivalent to the development of a flagship program, with a 2 to 3-year duration. A proposal for the Community of Practice is prepared and submitted for a competitive review. If selected, funding is provided for the development of

the COP, including the identification of experts who will contribute information. COP funding is considered to be a national competitive grant; ongoing operation of the COP beyond three years could lead to future competitive grants.

- Participation in the eXtension annual conference offers opportunities for national presentations and poster sessions.

We in eXtension applaud this effort and have encouraged other institutions to share similar guidelines with us. We hope to build a set of scholarship guidelines to address the issue of the scholarship of eXtension.

## SUMMARY

The environment of eXtension is a catalyst for transformation of the Cooperative Extension System of the Land Grant Universities nationwide. Faculty and professionals involved in content creation for eXtension are change agents in how educational products and programs are developed. Scholarship must be broadened in its definition to reflect not just the individual content expertise, but also the scholarship of collaboration and the scholarship of engagement. The research based knowledge of the world is growing in geometric proportions and it takes many great minds working collaboratively and in an engaged manner with the public to have that knowledge make a real difference in people's lives.

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