

The Pursuit of Becoming a Scholar

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Introduction / Need for Innovation

Faculty face numerous expectations as they pursue promotion and tenure enroute to become a scholar in research-intensive universities in the United States. The process of becoming a scholar is a long process of making priorities, being strategic, taking risks, and maintaining a work-life tension of being well (Knobloch, 2010). However, the environment in higher education is less than ideal (Larson et al., 2019). Faculty in agricultural education and communication have numerous responsibilities (Kitchel & Ball, 2014), a hectic schedule, lots of meetings, layers of bureaucracy, tedious hours of planning and grading, and a long and slow grind of reflection and introspection to be innovative and advance the knowledge base and practice of their field. Faculty cannot control many competing challenges they face, yet they can clarify and refine their passion in pursuit of becoming a scholar, including professional identities, values, and goals (Gallos, 1996).

How It Works / Program Phases / Steps

A workshop was hosted by a graduate student organization. A date was set that worked for most of the students. The workshop was offered in a hybrid format—both face-to-face and virtually. Six students were present in person and four students attended virtually. A full professor, who published a chapter on how to become a scholar (Knobloch, 2010), reflected on his experiences and expanded and updated what was written 15 years ago. The professor prepared the workshop slides after: (1) reading the chapter and reflecting on additional experiences from being promoted to full professor, (2) serving six years on a college-level promotion committee, and (3) applying for an internal job to transfer his tenure-track position to a new department after the department they were in was closed. The slides highlighted key principles and how doctoral students could apply the principles in preparing and continuing their scholarly journey. The professor asked questions and presented concepts and asked students to write down ideas on how they could apply the concepts and principles. Students were given two weeks to consider what they learned and they were asked to provide feedback on how they benefited from the workshop.

Results to Date / Implications

The workshop was started with a discussion question, “What is the work environment for someone with a Ph.D.?” Students and the facilitator shared their perspectives, which provided a context for the participants to consider as they engaged in four application exercises to clarify their professional identity (Gallos, 1996) and scholarly opportunities (Larson et al., 2019).

For Exercise 1, students were asked to explain the paradox of diversity and unity as a scholar. Diversity represents an array of contextualized applications of one’s scholarly focus. Unity represents one’s theoretical drive and purpose for doing scholarship. The application exercise in the workshop asked students to answer the following questions: (1) What is the theoretical drive of your research? (2) What are at least 10 different specific contexts you could apply your research interests? (3) Using this information, write a sentence that answers the question, “What is your research?” Students practiced their 40-second responses and received feedback from the facilitator and other students.

For Exercise 2, students were asked to describe their WIDWID (why I do what I do) in 10 words or less—both regardless of job responsibilities and context. Using this information, students shared and received feedback after answering the question, “What do you do?”

For Exercise 3, students were asked to respond to the following questions, “What is your laboratory? What are some possible laboratories for a social scientist / faculty in an education and communication department?” The participants identified where they will conduct interventions and innovative strategies as well as make observations and analyze data. Based on this information, students shared a 40-second response to the following question, “Where is your laboratory?”

For Exercise 4, the participants were asked to consider the difference between being an opportunistic versus purpose-driven scholar. Participants were reminded they should develop purposefully driven inquiry that is focused, framed, and aligned with theory (Author, 2010), and “the indispensable skill set of a [social scientist] can become a liability to conducting research and engaging as a scholar in the research enterprise” (p. 46). Students were asked the following questions, “Why are these two statements important? How will they help someone with a Ph.D. become a scholar? What is your research? What skills are you excellent in performing?”

Regarding results, students agreed the workshop was valuable because it engaged them to think specifically about how they could market their professional identities as a future scholar. One first-year student shared, “it helped me re-think my plan of study for my doctorate degree.” A doctoral candidate shared, “I will reframe how I write my letter of application and network with other faculty at conferences.” Students agreed the workshop was useful and were able to apply the strategies in their graduate education. A doctoral student shared, “I found that the information was useful and beneficial in informing how I should organize my thoughts and documentation. I have tried to maintain a strong plan moving forward through my career so this workshop can help inform my actions to execute that plan.” Finally, the workshop engaged students to think about their future as one student shared, “the workshop has provoked reflection on my career path and what actionable steps I should be taking to have the future career I want.”

Future Plans / Advice to Others

Based on the students’ comments, questions, and feedback, additional content, strategies, and contextual applications were developed for subsequent workshops. Students were interested in future workshops to build on what they learned in the initial workshop: (1) one follow-up workshop will focus on the planning process to become a scholar, and (2) another workshop will focus on people and organizational skills (Boyce & Aguilera, 2021). Further, participants asked the professor to consider additional venues this information could be shared with other students and early career doctoral professionals. Based on the participants’ feedback, the facilitator decided to share the ideas in conferences settings and get feedback with the goal of eventually publishing a revised version of strategies to become a scholar.

Costs / Resources Needed

The cost of the workshop was minimal. The venue and virtual program was provided by the professor’s host department and institution. The graduate student spent approximately one hour to identify a time and schedule the venue and virtual platform. The professor spent approximately 16 hours planning for the workshop. The workshop was two hours in length.

References

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