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# Strength-based scholarship and good education: The scholarship circle

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## ABSTRACT

In an era in which ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education attracts much attention, what is ‘scholarship’? In this conceptual paper, I re-examine the notion of scholarship in relation to the goals and purposes of higher education. How does ‘scholarship’ speak to value-based conceptions of ‘good’ education in the European tradition, encapsulated in the German term *Bildung*? How might the notion of scholarship relate to the principles, practices and ‘outputs’ of research? I argue that a more nuanced understanding of the legitimate diversity of scholarly practices in higher education could help individuals develop scholarly careers that draw on their personal values, strengths and goals. It can also help departments and institutions reward education-focused scholars and leaders more equitably. Finally, realising fully the synergies between education and research within a holistic ‘scholarship circle’ can strengthen institutions’ capacities for making an impact for good in the world.

## KEYWORDS

Scholarship; *Bildung*;  
teaching excellence;  
leadership

## Introduction

The higher education sector globally is complex and multi-layered. Diverse sizes and types of institution, funded and influenced by a range of stakeholders, carry out multiple missions in hugely diverse contexts. Student education is a core focus, however, and there is increasing pressure on institutions to improve their educational offering and quality through efficiency, innovation, teaching excellence and effective leadership in the ‘teaching and learning’ domain (Gibbs, 2010; Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Land & Gordon, 2015; Locke, 2014). The forms of enquiry into education known as ‘the scholarship of teaching and learning’, or SoTL, can enable practitioners in higher education to take forward their thinking and their practices: see Fanghanel, Pritchard, Potter, and Wisker (2016) for a recent literature review. However, definitions of SoTL are messy. As Fanghanel, Pritchard and Potter point out,

The US-born concept of SoTL has been used in the academic discourse for well over three decades ... [It] remains, however, a relatively ill-defined concept, to capture activities related to enhancement of, and reflection on, practice in higher education. (2016, p. 6)

Can exploring the notion of scholarship more broadly help us revisit the scholarship of teaching and learning, for the benefit of both individual scholars and institutions? I draw here on both US and European scholarly traditions to propose a new framing of scholarship to highlight vital but sometimes overlooked connections between the purpose of higher education and the nature of ‘good’ scholarship

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and 'good' education. At a time of significant change in the sector, this analysis speaks to policy, theory and practice.

## Scholarship

When we speak of scholarship, what are we really talking about? What does 'good' scholarship look like? In the US, the term took on renewed importance with the publication of Boyer's influential *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate* (1990). Analysing the changing characteristics of higher education in the US since its early years, Boyer noted a shift of emphasis from undergraduate education to research:

the focus had moved from the student to the professoriate, from general to specialised education, and from loyalty to the campus to loyalty to the profession. (Boyer, 1990, p. 13)

Boyer proposed new thinking about scholarship (defined as 'the work of the professoriate') and argued for 'enlarging the perspective' so that the different strands of academic work – education, research and 'service' – are re-conceptualised. In earlier times, Boyer argued, 'scholarship' referred to 'a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places'. He explained that its 'integrity' had been 'measured by the ability to think, communicate, and learn' (p. 15). But now we have

a more restricted view of scholarship, one that limits it to a hierarchy of functions. Basic research has come to be viewed as the first and most essential form of scholarly activity ... Scholars are academics who conduct research, publish, and then perhaps convey their knowledge to students or apply what they have learned. The latter functions *grow out of* scholarship, they are not considered to be a part of it. (p. 15)

Rejecting this separation, Boyer recognised that research, education and service undertaken by academics are profoundly interdependent activities:

We believe that the time has come to move beyond the tired old 'teaching vs research' debate and give the familiar and honorable term 'scholarship' a broader, more capacious meaning, one that brings legitimacy to the full scope of academic work. Surely, scholarship means engaging in original research. But the work of the scholar also means stepping back from one's investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one's knowledge effectively to students. (p. 16)

At the heart of Boyer's argument is the need to sustain a *capacious* perspective on what scholarship is, and not to narrow it down to particular forms or expressions. Scholarship encompasses 'stepping back', 'looking for connections' and 'communicating one's knowledge effectively'.

Boyer's influential representation of scholarship as 'four separate, yet overlapping, functions' comprises:

[T]he scholarship of *discovery*; the scholarship of *integration*; the scholarship of *application*; and the scholarship of *teaching*. (p. 16)

Each of the four areas has a particular emphasis – (a) discovering new knowledge; (b) integrating different areas of knowledge; (c) applying knowledge, by linking theory with practice and thereby engaging with peers and wider communities, and (d) developing disciplinary knowledge and investigating the principles and practices of education. However, Boyer emphasises their common underpinning *purpose*: making a difference to society. He challenges institutions to 'clarify campus missions and relate the work of the academy more directly to the realities of contemporary life' (Boyer, 1990, p. 13). For Boyer, 'scholarship ... is a communal act' (Boyer, 1996, p. 16), and his 'scholarship of engagement' has inspired traditions of service learning and public engagement (see, e.g. Curtis & Blair, 2010), whereby scholarship is directed at enriching the lives of individuals and communities.

Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997), following Boyer, focused on evaluating the work of scholars. Their six dimensions (or 'standards') of scholarly activity for review are: clear goals; adequate preparation; appropriate methods; significant results; effective presentation and reflective critique. The purpose of scholarship is particularly illustrated in their category of 'effective presentation':

Scholarship, however brilliant, lacks fulfilment without someone on the receiving end. The discovery should be made known to more than the discoverer; teaching is not teaching without students; integration makes scant

contribution unless it is communicated so that people can benefit from it; and application becomes application by addressing others' needs. (Glassick et al., 1997, p. 31)

The authors ask whether scholars are using 'appropriate forums' for their intended audiences: 'Does the scholar present his or her message with clarity and integrity?' (p. 32). They note that as 'a public act', which needs 'a sense of audience', scholarship benefits from exploiting new technologies and media. Indeed, more than presentation, it requires the ability to listen to and interact with one's audiences:

Effective presentation ... may require the scholar to do more listening than speaking, recognising that what the audience says is part of communication. (Glassick et al., 1997, p. 32)

There is an important emphasis here on the principle of multi-way communication, which enables scholars to engage productively with different communities and cultures, whether academic, professional or public.

To summarise, in this tradition, 'good' scholarship in the round, comprising research, teaching and 'service' (to the institution or community), is characterised by integrity in the practices of systematic enquiry and discovery; a willingness to create interconnections across scholarly domains, practice and new applications; and engaging with others, both to make an impact beyond the scholar's immediate context and to enrich that scholarship through feedback and collaboration. So how does this construction of scholarship relate specifically to student education?

## Education

If the scholarship of teaching and learning enables scholars to 'reflect on, and transform, teaching and learning practices' (Fanghanel, Pritchard, Potter, & Wisker, 2015, p. 3), how are we defining 'good' education in the university sector? What are its characteristics and values? How do scholars know that through their scholarship they are improving student education, and not just changing it? To answer those questions a position on good education needs to be taken, by individuals, institutions and communities.

One way of thinking of good education is to see it in terms of assuring the quality of institutional systems. There is a strong recent tradition, internationally, of systematically assessing the quality of higher education against a set of standards (QAA, 2015). Typically, quality is seen in terms of evaluating institutional provision and the extent to which it effectively meets pre-stated objectives; this includes ensuring that students achieve pre-defined 'intended learning outcomes'. Quality processes address issues of standards and accountability; higher education's stakeholders, including taxpayers, government, fee-paying students and research-funders, are entitled to such scrutiny. But do these national and international processes get to the heart of 'good' education, and address fully the extent to which the pre-set objectives themselves are valuable (to whom?).

A critique of modern higher education is that education has been translated into a personalised learning model, profoundly individualistic in its focus and instrumental in its aims (see, e.g. Biesta, 2004; Contu, Geey, & Örténblad, 2003). This individualism is reflected in the 'students as consumers' notion, which has particular resonance now in England where student fees have risen sharply in recent years; institutions are seen as 'sources of marketable commodities for their customers, be they students, business or the state' (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 5). The contemporary discourse around 'teaching excellence', for example in the UK Government Green Paper (BIS, 2015) introducing the notion of a Teaching Excellence Framework, is also underpinned by a predominant focus on individuals' opportunities and achievements within a competitive and diversifying sector.

A recent publication from UNESCO (2015), *Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?*, challenges us to take a more collectivist view. The authors ask, 'What is the purpose of education in the current context of societal transformation?' (p. 3). This publication calls for 'dialogue among all stakeholders', and presents

a humanistic vision of education and development, based on respect for life and human dignity, equal rights, social justice, cultural diversity, international solidarity, and shared responsibility for a sustainable future. These are the fundamentals of our common humanity. (p. 9)

This emphasis on education as a public good is not new. In the early years of the university sector in Europe, von Humboldt's model of a university was underpinned by a collective, public mission: education and research were seen as inextricably linked, combining to benefit society (Boulton & Lucas, 2008). The German term for education, *Bildung*, does connote individual transformation: with origins in German idealism, it refers to the need for envisaging a valued picture (*Bild*) of oneself, and then working towards attaining the self that is envisaged. Schneider defines *Bildung* as 'action to create a self that is valuable' (Schneider, 2012, p. 305). However, the individual (learner or scholar) develops through dialogue, through coming into understanding with others, so that both individual and community are changed. The German philosopher Gadamer (2004) uses the term *Horizontverschmelzung* to convey the ways in which personal horizons of understanding can meet and merge; the development or 'becoming' of individuals, each of whom inevitably bring both prior learning and unexamined assumptions into any learning moment, is contingent upon critical dialogue and mutual engagement. In this framing of good education, each mind must remain 'unsatisfied with what it imagines it knows' (Fairfield, 2012, p. 3); there is a necessary disposition for openness and for seeking out new ways of thinking and being in the world. *Bildung* thus foregrounds the value of education to the individual and to the wider community.

Reindal (2013) characterises *Bildung* as the call 'to take responsibility for the humanity in one's own person and to contribute to the on-going conversation between educated persons' (Reindal, 2013, p. 537). She refers to *Bildung* in critiquing work on the Bologna Process in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015), which focuses on aligning levels and expectations of study ('outcomes') across the European higher education sector. For Reindal, participants in that process are not paying sufficient attention to values. She illustrates her argument by citing a letter written by a school Principal who, having survived a concentration camp during the First World War, reflects on the highly educated people who took key roles in the atrocities of the holocaust. The Principal calls upon teachers to 'Help your students become human' (Reindal, 2013, p. 538). Reindal writes:

Faced with this challenge – to prevent a situation where educated people carry out the kinds of atrocities perpetrated during World War II – we can rightly ask: do the learning outcomes – the cycle descriptors, knowledge, skills and general competence – constitute a sufficient basis for higher education? (p. 538)

Drawing on Kierkegaard, Reindal argues that 'thinking makes *ethical* demands' (p. 545), and that 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' are insufficient markers of good education.

For William Pinar, also taking a value-based, critical stance in his work on curriculum, teachers are 'communicants in a complicated conversation' (Pinar, 2012, p. 25). Pinar argues that good education is not about teachers' facilitating learning but about giving both teachers and students a voice:

Expressing one's subjectivity through academic knowledge is how ... one demonstrates to students that scholarship can speak to them, how in fact scholarship can enable them to speak. (Pinar, 2012, p. 22)

For Pinar, the inequalities and power differentials that are barriers to this conversation must be addressed. A call to give all people a place and voice in education, in our profoundly unequal world, also underpins the UNESCO publication:

[Our] approach emphasizes the inclusion of people who are often subject to discrimination – women and girls, indigenous people, persons with disabilities, migrants, the elderly and people living in countries affected by conflict. It ... provides the opportunity for all to realise their potential for a sustainable future and a life of dignity. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 10)

The authors promote a holistic approach to education which 'goes beyond narrow utilitarianism and economism to integrate the multiple dimensions of human existence', and which is 'guided by environmental stewardship and by concern for peace, inclusion and social justice' (UNESCO, 2015, p. 10).

So how might 'good' education be defined? Through one lens, it is the efficient meeting of one's own 'measurable objectives' in such a way that comparable standards of 'quality', achievement and accountability can be recognised. Through another, it is the 'becoming' of individuals and communities through dialogue and engagement, leading to the advancement of shared human principles. For me, the first may be operationally useful, but the second exemplifies more fully the integrity and purposes of scholarship.

## Research

If good education is characterised by enquiry and critique directed at both the development of individuals and the public good, how might research, 'the scholarship of discovery', be characterised? Research has been defined as 'advancing the frontiers of knowledge' (Nurse, 2015, p. 11): how does it relate then to education, and to scholarship more broadly?

As noted above, von Humboldt's influential 'idea of a university' articulated research as a form of enquiry inextricably connected with education. One of his three foundational principles was 'the unity of research and teaching', with the others being freedom of teaching and academic self-governance (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 2). In a much more recent European publication, McAleese argues similarly that

There is no contradiction between the imperative of good teaching and the imperative of research which critiques, refines, discards and advances human knowledge and understanding. (McAleese, 2013, p. 13)

Education and research are two areas of activity that mirror and even merge with one other.

Barnett (2011), however, describes how over time the 'research university' has accrued tremendous privileges, moving 'from scholarship and learning to knowledge and research' (Barnett, 2011, p. 442). Research-intensive universities have become particularly powerful in the era of the 'knowledge economy' (Peters, Marginson, & Murphy, 2009). Barnett notes that knowledge has fragmented into disciplines rather than 'forming a unity', with each discipline having 'its own properties and perspectives' (Barnett, 2011, p. 442). A hierarchical division has also arisen between disciplines, with sciences privileged over arts and humanities.

The Nurse Report (2015), investigating the roles and futures of the research funding councils in the UK, revisits the nature and purpose of research in the modern era. Nurse argues that all academic disciplines are important – natural sciences, technologies, medicine, the social sciences, the arts and the humanities – because research in all areas 'produces knowledge that enhances our culture and civilisation and can be used for the public good' (Nurse, 2015, p. 2). Boulton and Lucas agree that universities 'operate on complex and mutually sustaining fronts' (2008, p. 4). However, they take issue with the strong contemporary emphasis on 'corporate effectiveness', arguing that research and teaching 'interact powerfully ... through the ideas and the people that will both respond to and shape an as yet unknown future' (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 4).

Research is a valuable and prestigious commodity. But a value-based conception of research connects us to the roots of scholarship in the round: ethical enquiry, application, communication and engagement, for the good of society. Revisiting the purpose and values underpinning research, construed as a public good and not primarily a marker of esteem in the 'prestige economy' (Blackmore, 2016), may help both individuals and institutions reconsider the balance of their activities and goals.

## The scholarship circle

The term scholarship occupies a broad place semantically, conceptually and in practice. 'Scholarship' signifies the principled space that connects integrity, research, teaching, learning, personal development and contribution to the world. The term embodies the hermeneutic principle that the human mind must remain open, which is at the core of critical thinking and being. Scholarship reflects the educational qualities of *Bildung*, the creation of the valuable self. It enables scholars to speak, no matter who they are. Scholarship is infused by the principles of research: ethical, systematic enquiry that pushes the edge of what it is possible to know. And scholarly enquiry, whatever its focus, needs to provide opportunities for critical engagement with the very structures within which these practices occur, and with the power relations that sustain them.

The territory of scholarship is represented below in a simplified model (Figure 1):

At scholarship's core lie the principles and practices of critical enquiry and dialogue, directed simultaneously towards both the development of self *and* engagement with and impact on others. This engagement may range from 'service' to peers, the department or institution, to local/regional engagement with communities, professions and organisations, to principled engagement at national

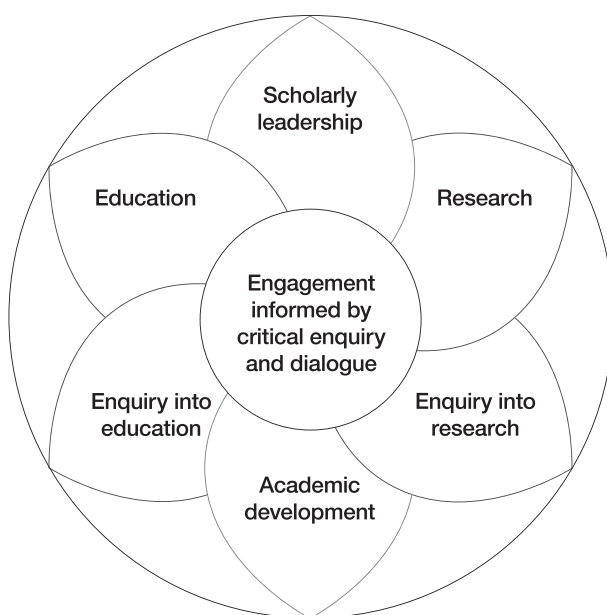


Figure 1. The scholarship circle.

and international levels. Effective engagement is interactive: it is not just a unilateral dissemination of findings. It reflects that 'integrity' referred to by Boyer, 'measured by the ability to think, communicate, and learn' (1990, p. 15).

Emerging from this core are the distinctive yet interdependent scholarly practices of education, research and scholarly leadership. Education as a domain comprises multiple dimensions of theory and practice: more than 'teaching and learning', it encompasses multiple elements, such as philosophical vision for the discipline(s), curriculum design, creativity with resources, physical and online spaces, and the development of constructive partnerships with fellow scholars, alumni and external organisations. Enquiry *into* education can address any dimension of education or education leadership. Its corollary is enquiry *into* research; research itself is a complex spectrum of practices, principles and applications. Enquiry into research has traditionally been surprisingly limited in scope (Brew, 2001), but it is an area of scholarship that has much potential given the high importance placed on research within modern society. Academic development, incorporating professional and personal learning, supports scholarship in all areas, especially when it, too, is authentically enquiry-based. Finally scholarly leadership is a vital area of both practice and enquiry, whether that leadership occurs in the education domain or in the field of research, or both.

### Strength-based scholarship

With so much in the rich circle of scholarship, how can individual scholars forge a meaningful path through it? In a recent study, Claire Gordon and I recommended a *strength-based* approach to both undertaking and rewarding scholarship. Strength-based scholarship 'builds on the existing values, passions, intellectual curiosity and preferred modes of expression of individuals and teams' (Fung & Gordon, 2016, p. 42). Respecting the diversity of contexts and roles in which educators work, we argue that there should be flexibility regarding the kinds of scholarship undertaken – whether in a home subject discipline, in a professional field, focusing on their own teaching practice or in any other scholarly field of importance to them and their institution:



[T]he issue is arguably whether the educator is making an impact in their field ... in a way which is appropriate for their particular context. (p. 42)

Strength-based scholarship allows scholars to build on existing strengths not only in their modes of enquiry, but in their modes of engagement with students, peers and public. This includes respecting and promoting the full range of scholarly discourses, from all disciplinary traditions. Peer-reviewed journal articles are important, but other modes of communication can be highly effective, including creative writing, visual arts, open public events and interactive multi-media presentations.

There can be, of course, a tension between individual scholarly freedoms and institutional priorities and constraints. Fellenz notes the 'autonomy paradox' in professional fields, where individuals are required both 'to do good and to do well' (Fellenz, 2015), and this potential tension needs to be effectively negotiated. But cultivating scholarship that is authentic for individuals and peer groups, and is congruent with their values, talents and goals, strengthens individuals, teams and institutions.

### Implications for educators and education developers

For teachers, education developers and leaders, revisiting the principles and values of good scholarship and of good education can help us reflect on our own careers as scholars: what does strength-based scholarship mean to me in my role, in my discipline, in my area(s) of engagement with the university and with the world? It can also prompt us to reflect on our educational provision. Boyer originally focused on scholarship as 'the work of the professoriate', but the Boyer Commission (1998) emphasised the need for students to engage with research. Looking afresh at the scholarship circle we may see it as territory that can be legitimately occupied by students, too. Models of research-based education, whereby students learn through research and active scholarly enquiry throughout their studies, connect education and research for both faculty and students in a symbiotic learning and research community (Fung, *in press*).

The following questions may stimulate reflection and discussion:

- (1) Am I advancing my own scholarship by investigating aspects of teaching, research, practice and/or scholarly leadership that genuinely matter to me?
- (2) Am I using modes of enquiry that are authentic to my way of knowing the world, for example by using methodologies that reflect my values?
- (3) Am I actively broadening my horizons through dialogue with colleagues, students and alumni who bring other perspectives?
- (4) Am I engaging with a variety of external audiences/communities, and allowing that engagement to inform and strengthen my scholarship?
- (5) Am I expressing my own scholarship in a wide variety of modes of communication, appropriate for different audiences?
- (6) Am I proactively seeking to engage with 'knowledges' from different cultural traditions?
- (7) Am I working with others to create opportunities for scholarly partnerships, building bridges within and beyond my department?
- (8) Am I explicitly building values-based, scholarly enquiry into all levels of the curriculum?
- (9) Am I enabling all students to have a voice within and beyond the class, for example through diverse student assessments in which they engage with audiences?
- (10) Am I seeking to lead peers and junior colleagues, inspiring them to draw on and develop *their* strengths as scholars and develop scholarly, enquiry-based curricula?

### Implications for institutions

For institutions looking to develop scholarship and reward scholars, important questions also arise. Recent studies evidence the lack of parity of esteem, reward and opportunity for teachers and education leaders in comparison with research-focused academics (Cashmore, Cane, & Cane, 2013; Fung &



Gordon, 2016; Locke, 2014). A clearer articulation of an institution's full spectrum of scholarly activities and how these are mutually beneficial can pave the way towards more equitable recognition and reward.

Institutions may find it helpful to discuss the following questions, which draw from the recent study by Fung and Gordon (2016).

- (1) Has the institution fully articulated, within its own community, the values that underpin all areas of its scholarly activity?
- (2) Has the institution expressed its scholarly values effectively to the full range of external stakeholders?
- (3) Is the institution fully exploring and exploiting the synergies between different areas of scholarship, including the symbiotic relationship between research and education?
- (4) Are opportunities and resources being made available for scholars whose main strengths are in building new bridges between apparently disparate areas?
- (5) Has the institution reviewed organisational structures, job roles and promotion criteria to ensure that the full range of scholarship, including education-focused scholarship, is fostered and rewarded?
- (6) Does the institution recognise fully the value of scholarship expressed through non-traditional modes of communication?
- (7) Is scholarly leadership, including education-focused leadership, fully recognised, developed and rewarded?
- (8) Is sufficient resource, including time, made available for all scholars to engage in academic/professional development, throughout their careers?
- (9) Does the institution explicitly draw on scholarly values and evidence-based enquiry when making decisions about its own practices and plans?
- (10) Do students at all levels of the curriculum engage fully as partners in the institution's scholarship, both contributing to and benefiting from its impact on local communities, professional practices and wider society?

## Conclusions

A renewed focus on the interconnected principles and values of scholarship – for all in higher education who are leaders, educators, researchers, professionals and/or students – can arguably shed light on current practices and break down conceptual and operational barriers that limit our possibilities. At the heart of scholarship lie principles that underpin excellence in education *and* in research: a disposition for critical enquiry and dialogue, a willingness to engage with others and make an impact on communities and the world. The Boyer Commission called for universities to become 'an intellectual ecosystem':

Universities are communities of learners ... The shared goals of investigation and discovery should bind together the disparate elements to create a sense of wholeness. (Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 9)

The 'scholarship circle' presented here also illustrates the holistic nature of scholarship. Recognition of the interdependence of its elements is important – not just for the scholar herself, but for institutions trying to make sense of what sometimes seem to be disparate, even contradictory, missions. Artificially separating the different elements impoverishes individuals, institutions and communities (Locke, 2005; Macfarlane, 2011).

Only in stepping back and seeing the whole ecology of higher education can institutions 'take seriously both the world's interconnectedness and the university's interconnectedness with the world' (Barnett, 2011, p. 451) and ensure that scholarship, research and education, all rooted in enquiry and expressed through engagement, can enrich one another. And only then can teachers, students, researchers and leaders range broadly and deeply with their scholarship, using authentic modes of expression. By broadening the territory of our scholarship from narrow spaces bounded by dominant theories

and discourses, each of us can contribute more fully, drawing on our personal and collective values, strengths and visions, to the impact of scholarship across and beyond the academy.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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