Serving a Fragmented Field: Information Seeking in Higher Education

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examines the information seeking habits and needs of scholars of higher education. Because higher education is a field which draws on many disciplinary traditions rather than a pure discipline in itself, the information needs of these scholars require diverse information seeking strategies. Phenomenological interviews with productive scholars of higher education were conducted and analyzed for this study. Ellis' (1989) *common information seeking behaviors of social scientists* are used as a framework to examine the behaviors of these applied social scientists in the modern information seeking environment.

Introduction

The study of higher education is an applied social science (Biglan, 1973). This makes the information environment for the field different from pure disciplines (such as anthropology or sociology) because the scholarly conversation includes practitioners as well as scholars. Scholars of higher education must communicate with higher education practitioners, despite their diverging goals to advance knowledge in the field and execute quality higher education. In applied fields like education, literature from outside the scholarly community can be important sources of information. Mary Kennedy (2001) points out that scholarship in education struggles between its allegiance to practitioners and its obligation to conform to the expectations of the academy. Information seeking in higher education is representative of information seeking in other applied social sciences that also share this rift (such as social work or criminal justice). While many studies of scholarly information seeking such as Housewright, Schonfeld, and Wulfson's (2013) focus on information seeking differences between the humanities, sciences, and social sciences, few focus on the information seeking differences between applied fields and pure disciplines. This study examined information seeking in one applied field.

The purpose of this study was to explore the information needs of scholars in the field of higher education. Altbach (2014) points out that higher education is a field, rather than a discipline. Since higher education scholarship is defined by its object of study rather than a disciplinary method of inquiry, scholars in the field draw on expertise from a variety of disciplines. Interdisciplinary fields, such as higher education, create a particularly large obligation to keep up with developments in scholarship because they draw on more than one body of knowledge. One goal of this study was to identify productive information seeking behaviors for higher education scholars. Another

goal was to identify how their information needs can be better supported. It is important to understand the information needs of faculty members in higher education programs to support their work. Academic libraries, university administrators, and publishers will be able to serve higher education scholars better if they are more aware of their habits and desires for information access. Studying productive information seeking for faculty members in Higher Education also informs our knowledge of it for graduate students.

Higher education faculty members draw on expertise from a variety of disciplines. Budd and Magnuson (2010) identified the top 20 cited scholars in the top three journals of higher education. Many of these scholars hold PhDs in Education, but others hold PhDs in Communication and Psychology. They also hold varied master's degrees including Education, Labor and Industrial Relations, Communication, Psychology, Economics, Political Science, and English. Their bachelor's degrees stem from a variety of fields as well. The course catalogs of higher education doctoral programs reflect similar combinations of disciplines. Course offerings include policy, organizational theory, history, law, finance, and sociology of education. Students may also acquire their methodological training in departments outside of education, such as public policy, anthropology, sociology, or communication. These varied backgrounds include training in different styles of citation, emphasis on different publication formats, and encouragement of different writing styles, which could all affect how a scholar seeks and differentiates between sources. While the field in aggregate is interdisciplinary, this does not imply that all or most of the scholars in the field do interdisciplinary work. A given higher education researcher may share the research tendencies of a positivist scientist or a constructivist humanist. This means that although interdisciplinary search tools would be needed to find information relevant to all higher education topics, databases intended for individual topics, such as

psychology, sociology, gender studies, may be of most use to an individual scholar.

Tight's (2012) picture of higher education shows its diversity. He identified eight main themes in higher education research: teaching and learning, course design (including educational technologies), the student experience, quality assessment, policy, institutional management, academic work (including its changing nature and academic work in different countries), and knowledge and research (including disciplinarity). He also identified eight main methods for higher education research: document analysis, international comparisons, interviews, surveys and multivariate analysis, conceptual analysis, phenomenography, critical perspectives, and biography or observation. He identified eight levels of analysis: individual, course, department, institution, region, nation, system, and international. Tight also pointed out several disciplines from which theories of Higher Education arise. These include sociology, such as Bourdieu's work; psychology, such as Vygotsky's work; management; economics; linguistics; and biology.

Because higher education is an interdisciplinary field, which relies on the literature of many other fields, higher education scholars have a particularly large obligation to read. They must keep track, not only of the developments in their own field, but also in the fields from which they can draw theories and methods. The scholarship in many of these fields is expanding at an exponential rate. Scholars might be tempted to concentrate on higher education literature to limit the amount of information they need to examine, but this would limit the creativity and utility of their analyses.

According to Bates (2002), well-defined research domains with many topically relevant materials are best searched by browsing, domains with a medium amount of topically relevant materials are best searched by directed subject searches, and domains with very sparse and scattered topically relevant materials are best searched by chaining. Interdisciplinary fields like education are more scattered than pure disciplines, so one might expect browsing to be less important in the field of education. However, since particular areas of higher education research may fall at varied points in the scale from scattered to well defined, different search strategies may be advisable for different subtopics. Because the sample for this study includes scholars whose research topics include all eight of the themes Tight (2012) identified for higher education, the study represents the range of searching practiced by scholars in all of these subfields.

The resources for finding literature in a discipline reflect the outlets for publication in the discipline. Because higher education faculty borrow methods and theories from a variety of disciplines, their publication habits may vary based on the disciplines they draw mostly heavily from. As Fry (2006) points out, intellectually pluralistic fields like education have difficulty designing appropriate digital scholarly communication outlets and therefore rely on the outlets established by other disciplines. In the humanities, monographs are a highly valued form of publication (Housewright et al., 2013, p. 57). In the sciences, publishing in digital repositories such as arXiv or Public Library of Science is common (Housewright et al., 2013, p. 60). A particular scholar of higher education may fall closer to either the humanities model or the sciences model based on their epistemology. Because departments of higher education must include a diverse set of faculty interests in order to educate students in a diverse set of topics and methods, individual departments must accommodate scholars with very different orientations toward searching and publication.

Though the choices available for information seeking and dissemination are changing rapidly overall, the choices for higher education scholars have not changed at the same rate. The Social Science Research Network does not include a network for education research (Elsevier, 2017). At the time this article was written, *Higher Education* and *Research in Higher Education*, as Springer journals, offered authors the opportunity to make their published articles open access for a fee of $3000 (Springer, 2017). Taylor and Francis, publisher of *Studies in Higher Education*, and the *Journal of Higher Education*, charged $2950 for

gold open access and made allowances for the posting of preprints after an embargo period (Informa UK Limited, 2017). *The Review of Higher Education* did not offer a gold open access publishing option (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017). These fees are often prohibitive to scholars in a field where grant funding for research is much more rare and given at lower amounts than in many sciences. This lack of options for open access in higher education is not ideal, because the majority of scholars in social science fields such as education rate societal impact as a key to measuring their research performance (Wolff, Schonfeld, Rod, and Ithaka S + R, 2016, p. 36). Open access to scholarship can increase the societal impact of research by making it available to more of society. Several studies have found that articles available free online are more frequently cited than those behind paywalls (Lawrence, 2001; Zhang, 2006). Without support or motivation, higher education faculty members are unlikely to take on the expense of making their publications open access. Scholarship in the field is primarily published in subscription journals corresponding to the various subtopics among higher education (Bray & Major, 2011). Higher education's fragmented nature means scholarship in one area is not reviewed by a diverse audience from every school of thought, a practice which could lead to greater rigor and therefore greater prestige for the field. This may be true in other applied social science fields as well. This study set out to discover how scholars in an applied social science how they seek for information, which leads to knowledge of how they can be reached as an audience.

Methods

I conducted phenomenological interviews with 14 productive scholars of higher education. I used a critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) to help scholars recall their experiences accurately. To execute the critical incident technique, I asked scholars to recall the research strategies that went into a recently published or presented piece of scholarship to stimulate memories of specific experiences rather than allow them to generalize about their research habits. I used a semi-structured interview protocol to elicit responses from participants. My goal was to discover their information seeking behaviors in their own words, rather than from the perspective of a librarian. My sample included six women and eight men. Two scholars in the sample identified themselves as having been raised outside the United States. One scholar was a clinical professor, two were assistant professors, two were associate professors, one had just earned associate status, and the rest were full professors. My participants include Asians, an African American, a Latina, and Caucasians. In accordance with IRB requirements, all of my participants signed consent forms permitting the inclusion of their perspectives in publications based on this study.

I drew my sample from higher education faculty in doctoral degree granting programs in the United States. The largest number of higher education degrees are offered in the United States and university administration was professionalized in the U.S. before anywhere else (Altbach, 2014). To identify scholars from programs with high research expectations, I focused on institutions that are part of the Association of American Universities (AAU). My sample came from six universities in the Midwest. My sample included scholars whose H-indices as calculated by Scopus ranged between 3 for younger scholars up to 14 for prolific full professors. To place this in perspective, Ernest Pascarella, the most highly cited scholar in the field (Budd & Magnuson, 2010) has a Scopus H-index of 31 and Arthur Chickering, who is also in the top 20 (Budd & Magnuson, 2010) has a Scopus H-index of 4. Many of my participants have been cited hundreds of times. They have published in journals such as *Teacher's College Record*, *Educational Researcher*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Review of Higher Education*, and *Journal of College Student Development*. Several of the scholars also served on the editorial boards of several of these journals. Several of my participants have authored or edited books that