2012 UCEA Presidential Address

Optimism, Opportunity, and Obligation:
UCEA and the Future of Leadership Preparation and Practice

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Good afternoon everyone and welcome again to the 2012 UCEA Convention, “The Future Is Ours: Leadership Matters,” here in Denver, Colorado. Let me begin with my deepest personal gratitude to a number of people—some of whom are here today and others who are not. First, thank you to the UCEA membership for continuing to demonstrate that leadership remains a central focus of our scholarship and, as Gary Crow (2006) noted in his presidential speech, our work. I am deeply indebted to those along the way whose counsel has been immensely impactful to my professional purpose, including Pedro Reyes, Jay D. Scribner, Catherine Lugg, Ben Levin, Malu Gonzales, Gary Crow, Diana Pounder, and Steve Jacobson. To our UCEA Executive Director Michelle Young, for lifting this organization and the field into the 21st century with her tireless and consistent leadership, vision, and efforts, thank you.

Moreover, thank you to the members of the Executive Committee and UCEA staff and associate directors as well as the support of UCEA’s institutional host—the University of Virginia—for engaging deeply in the work of UCEA. I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the support of the tremendous collaborative team that I work with on a day-to-day basis in the Utah Education Policy Center—two of whom, Cori Groth and Irene Yoon, are here today—and the College of Education former Dean Michael Hardman and Interim Dean John McDonnell at the University of Utah for their enormous support. I also appreciate my colleagues in the ELP Department, students, practitioners, and decision makers who make this work real and necessary.

And thanks to this year’s program committee—then President Elect Cindy Reed, Lisa Kensler, Susan Korach, Cozette Grant-Overton—who have worked diligently since last year to ensure that our meeting is an opportunity for us to share, reflect, learn, plan, and act together. Before I begin in earnest, please join me in giving Dr. Cindy Reed, her program committee, UCEA Executive Director Michelle Young, and the UCEA staff a hand for their tremendous work and contributions for us to join together in this collegial environment to share our scholarship, build our relationships, and enhance our field.

My Journey to Here

I realize that my journey to this address today is pebbled with wonderful and, frankly, fortunate experiences. In the beginning of my career, my desire to be an educator was in response largely to the educational experiences of myself and others around me and a desire to make sure that the education wasn’t a by-product of family wealth or culture. Taught from an early age by my
Notes for Doctoral Students, Professors Early in Their Academic Careers, and Their Colleagues

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Over my career, I have had the privilege to work with a number of students, both as individuals and in groups, who were preparing for positions in the professoriate. Based on those experiences and lessons learned through my own work, I have formed some insights that may assist colleagues to enhance their effectiveness during their graduate school careers and the early years on the job. Since I believe that most of these insights require explicit instruction, colleagues who also prepare scholars for the professoriate may find the article of interest as well.

Let me begin with a caveat. There are three hallmark ingredients for excellent preparation for the professoriate: (a) deep and cutting-edge content knowledge in one or more areas of scholarship (e.g., the superintendency); (b) an exceptionally well-stocked toolbox of methodological skills, skills that allow one to design and carry out sophisticated studies on the edge of the known scholarly universe in question; and (c) a robust capacity to think and to write well. This article is not about these cardinal elements of preparation. Rather, the spotlight is directed to issues that can boost success across these areas. Eleven suggestions are clustered into three groups: notes on networking, notes on planning work, and notes on working.

Notes on Networking

An often-neglected dimension of early career development is the forging of networks of colleagues; think of forming webs of “professional friends.” These linkages do not happen by accident, at least not on a reliable basis. They need to be forged one scholar at a time. Here are some linkage-forming strategies that I have seen be productive over the years.

1. Join American Educational Research Association (AERA) Special Interest Groups (SIGs) in your areas of interest. Attend SIG meetings at the AERA convention. These groups are usually manageable in size, are constantly seeking new energy, and are generally comfortable environments for participation. Connections can be formed easily in the SIGs. Opportunities for leadership are often found in these organizations as well.

2. Volunteer when opportunities materialize. Become an officer in a SIG. Perform the role of chair or discussant at conferences. Volunteer for editorial boards. And strike this language from your head: “I couldn’t do that; I’m only a student [or a 2nd-year professor].” It is your career. Other people can help, but you need to be proactive on the linkage front.

3. Use professional conferences to network. You should become skilled at using professional conferences to create denser webs of professional linkages. Building webs through your work (i.e., articles) is the key here. But in the best of worlds, this is a slow-developing strategy. More proactiveness here is advisable. Before each conference, identify two or three people who do really good work in your area. Include both junior and senior colleagues. E-mail them. Introduce yourself and your work. Tell them what it is about their work that you appreciate. Ask if they have time for a cup of coffee at the convention. Follow up. Keep your eyes open for opportunities for shared work with these colleagues and others with whom they work. Get yourself in their web of professional linkages.

4. Take advantage of institutionally sponsored opportunities. There are three types of opportunities here: (a) those that are available to everyone (e.g., to present a paper at UCEA), (b) those that are available to everyone but that give a leg up to “junior” colleagues (e.g., SIG business meetings), and (c) those that target doctoral students (e.g., UCEA graduate student seminar). Work all three avenues, but keep a sharp eye out for opportunities in the last two categories.

5. Get your work on the street. Unpacking the intricacies of publishing is a topic for another essay (e.g., how to weigh different publication venues). Here, we just acknowledge a central reality of the process. It takes a good deal of time to get your work published. You need to “jump” the process whenever you can. One good method to do this is to identify 10–15 people whose work in your area of interest you admire. Send them hard copies of your conference paper or “in press” article. Let them know (briefly) how they influenced your thinking/work and tell them they might find your related piece to be of interest. A different list is likely to be needed for each paper. If you have something useful to say, there is a decent chance your work will begin to be referenced long before it appears in final form in a journal. New strands of the web will form.

Notes on Planning Work

6. Set targets. Everyone is busy. But some folks get a lot of their work out and others do not. Some not-insignificant part of the production algorithm features goals and targets. Here are three questions for which you want to form concrete answers:

1. How much time each week will you devote to research work? Set a target that includes only reading, data analysis,
and writing. Be aggressive. Remember, you do not go to dinner or read the paper Sunday morning till you hit your goal. All the other “stuff” will get done. You need your chips on research time.

2. How many conference presentations will you make each year, presentations based on papers?

3. How many refereed articles will you publish each year?

Use a 3-year rolling average as the test here. And yes, I mean as a doctoral student. Two is not a bad goal, by the way.

7. Develop and update lists of work “needing doing” on a yearly basis. Select a consistent time each year to develop (update) two agendas: long-term and yearly scholarly plans.³ The entire system is predicated on memos that you write yourself and throw into a folder or a dedicated drawer in your desk. These memos should flow from everything you read. For example, if you are reading something on principal-agent theory, you might create a memo like this: “I wonder if this critically important construct has ever been applied to teachers and children?” Or if you are reading an article on troubled district finances forcing the closing of schools, one memo you might generate is this: “It would be great if we could look at the theories of loss from different areas (e.g., sociology, diversity, psychology) to see how closing a school is felt in a community.” These are memos of puzzlement, insights about missing work, disagreements with authors, and so forth.

When you sit down every year to update your plans, these memos will be of enormous help. For example, the recent work on homeless children that Kerri Tobin and I have been doing came out of the “long-term plan,” where it had been for about 15 years. The “loss” project has been in the long-term folder (with a couple dozen other possible projects) for even longer. About half of my scholarly production this year was the direct result of memos thrown in the “short-term” folder last year. The system forces both daily and long-term proactiveness into your work, an especially wise piece of scaffolding early in one's career.

8. Learn to “spin down” academic publications for the other three players in the game—developers, policy makers, and practitioners. Refereed journal articles are the coin of the realm in the professoriate. This is good. You want your work to shape scholarship in important ways. But the truth of the matter is felt in a community.” These are memos of puzzlement, insights about missing work, disagreements with authors, and so forth.

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9. Avoid the silo. Many colleagues, you will discover, live in scholarly silos. The gravity in the profession will pull you in this direction. Having a lot to say about nothing will not help you, however. Nor will it do much for the rest of us either. Your goal, while specializing, is always to have one eyeball on the full landscape of the education profession. You want to be knowledgeable about all the major sectors of the enterprise and who is doing great work in those sectors. More importantly, you want to develop the habit of identifying the implications of that work for school leadership. For example, certainly part of the impetus for the new publications dedicated to the topic of preparing school leaders came from those with one eye focused on what was afoot in the field of preparing teachers. Remember also that almost every bit of theoretical scaffolding in educational leadership has been brought to us by scholars with one eye focused in other areas (e.g., the pervasive line of new work on “trust”).

Having eyes focused on different directions is not natural. You will need to cultivate the habit. One way to do this is to read extensively and to read outside the field. You will know you are successful here if you regularly stumble upon journals that you did not even know existed. A second is to devote a significant portion of your time at AERA tracking down and attending sessions outside Divisions A and L. Spending a weekend actually reading the AERA catalog from cover to cover may be the most productive “landscape” learning you can undertake.

10. Be a first mover. You will find that a good deal of attention has been devoted to most of the topics that are of interest to you. The scholarship on many already fills entire wings of the library. This is often, but certainly not always, good for the profession. But it makes your job more difficult. In order to study one of these “deeply explored” domains—and add to the body of extant knowledge—you will need to read and understand everything that is already available. It is also tougher to make a mark (i.e., leave scholarly fingerprints) in these areas.

For these reasons, it is wise to search for domains in your broad area of interest that are less trodden over than are other domains. For example, let us say that you are interested in the essential dynamic in play that is transforming the education industry from a public monopoly to client-oriented enterprise. Here one choice, a non-first-mover choice, would be to study charter schools. If so, you will need to spend considerable amounts of time exploring the 94 floors of that building that have already been constructed. Rest assured also that your piece of the 95th floor is going to be a fairly small section of the overall building. If you took your interest in this broad area of scholarship (e.g., privatization) and applied the same amount of intellectual investment to, say, homeschooling or virtual schools (topics of at least equal importance as charters), the outcome will be different. To begin with, you will find yourself working on creating the architectural designs and pouring the foundations of the building. Your contribution to and imprint on the field of privatization is also likely to be greater. Develop the intellectual habit of identifying and moving into important areas of work that are underdeveloped.

11. Determine if you are undertaking single-room or entire-house work. At the risk of some oversimplification, scholarly work falls into two categories: (a) work that is constrained,
that is, you can go into the house (e.g., democratic community) and capture almost all of what you need in one room, and (b) work that requires you to go from room to room to gather insights to answer the question(s) at hand. An example here will help. Let us say that the house of interest is “school improvement.” And let us say the question is, how does instruction vary among students from different social classes in the same classroom (i.e., with the same teacher)? In this case, I can garner almost everything I need in one room, the one labeled tracking and ability grouping. It is a big room for sure, but it is still one room. On the other hand, if I want to uncover the actions of principals in promoting student success in communities with very high levels of poverty, I will need to collect information from a lot of rooms and then cobble it together. I will need to spend time in the room on school change, in the curricular implementation rooms, in the room on successful special programs, and so on.

The salient point here is that “entire-house” work takes a great deal more time, it is often harder, and the scholarly outcomes of the efforts tend to be more distal. If time is constrained or you have not done much scholarly work in the past, then focusing on single-room work makes a good deal of sense.

Conclusion
The main storyline in preparing colleagues for work in the university is well formed. It is about developing robust content, knowledge, strong methodological tools, a good head, and a powerful quill. But there is a good bit of background narrative that is less visible as the preparation play unfolds. In this article, I tried to pull some of this material onto center stage. My observation is that there is a good deal of unnecessary stumbling about because we are less than explicit in helping young colleagues see and learn important insights about how to be successful as students and as early-career academics. My hope is that the lessons presented herein may assist in helping overcome that deficiency.

Grad Student Column Online
Two new elements within the UCEA website are focused on issues and information relevant to the graduate students of UCEA. The Graduate Student Column contains features about the graduate student experience, news from the world of educational administration that is of particular relevance to graduate students, profiles of graduate students involved with UCEA, interviews with researchers in the field, and much more. The Graduate Student Blog contains similar information, but in a more discussion-oriented format encouraging conversation between graduate students via posts and comments. Additional topics we hope to cover in the blog include information about the Clark Seminar and Jackson Scholars, job opportunities, research tips, and more. Please submit any topics or ideas you have for either the Graduate Student Column or the Graduate Student Blog by e-mailing ucea@virginia.edu.

www.ucea.org/graduate-student-column/
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