

Reflections on Contributing to a Discipline Through Research and Writing

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The professional responsibilities of college professors are conventionally grouped into research, teaching, and service roles. All three roles are critical and, in some respects, interrelated. However, the ability to execute the research role effectively—that is, contribute new knowledge that advances the discipline—is arguably the pivotal characteristic that truly distinguishes terminally qualified, tenure-track college professors from other professionals in our field.

Nonterminally qualified adjunct faculty (e.g., executives with extensive practical experience, superior communication skills, and a passion for teaching) can and do excel in the classroom. However, college education is a knowledge product characterized by “credence” properties that student consumers may be unable to assess accurately even after consumption. As such, all else being equal, professors with a reputation for being active researchers and contributing to their discipline’s knowledge base will be significantly more effective than will adjunct faculty in shoring up the confidence of skeptical student consumers who are unsure of the core quality and potential value of their education. Likewise, while performers of service roles that are primarily administrative in nature (e.g., student advising, curriculum design, course scheduling, program coordination, etc.) do not necessarily have to be terminally qualified to excel in those roles, the credentials for conducting doctoral seminars, supervising Ph.D. students, and acting as gatekeepers for the discipline (e.g., serving on editorial review boards of scholarly journals, promotion-and-tenure committees, etc.) invariably include a demonstrated ability to perform and publish high-quality, original research. Therefore, in addition to being significant in its own right, the research role is intertwined with, and is a prerequisite for, some of the most

important pedagogical and service functions that college professors may be called upon to perform during their careers. It is perhaps not surprising that “publish or perish” is a pervasive phrase in our professional lexicon; and, despite the importance of the teaching and service roles, phrases such as “teach or be terminated” and “serve or be severed” are not.

The constant admonition to publish or perish can be stressful and at times demoralizing, particularly to colleagues new to the profession. Nevertheless, such an admonition is unavoidable—and, in fact, necessary—given that our *defining* role as academics is to assist in advancing the discipline through research and writing. In this essay, I propose a typology of research and writing contributions and explore its implications for dealing with the publish-or-perish challenge. My musings herein are an amalgam of personal views formed over the years as an observer, researcher, writer, reviewer, and journal editor. They are necessarily subjective and subject to debate. But I hope they offer an interesting and helpful perspective, particularly for colleagues who are early in their careers.

A TYPOLOGY OF RESEARCH AND WRITING CONTRIBUTIONS

Influencing a discipline through research and writing can be accomplished through a variety of publication channels. The following are the primary conduits for channeling written contributions:

- Broad-based scholarly journals that are the discipline’s standard bearers
- Specialized scholarly journals that have a narrower scope in terms of content and/or methodology
- Scholarly books or book chapters
- “Applied” journals that are aimed primarily at practitioner audiences

- Textbooks
- Business books

Contributions made through the above channels can influence the discipline through multiple means as well:

- By triggering further scholarly discourse and research, which is vital for fueling the discipline's knowledge-generation engines and preserving the robustness of its R&D output
- By influencing Ph.D. students, the future keepers and enhancers of the discipline's R&D function (this influence can occur through honing the Ph.D. students' conceptual and methodological skills and through shaping their research domains and agendas)
- By presenting new paradigms and providing food for thought to thoughtful practitioners who are at the forefront of advancing the discipline's applications frontiers
- By offering managerial recommendations and how-to guidelines that have more immediate practical applications
- By providing pedagogical aids and course content for preparing students to be successful managers

Research and writing contributions made through any of the channels can influence a discipline through any of the aforementioned means. However, the channels vary with respect to the nature, endurance, and primary targets of the written contributions. Figure 1 portrays the variations I posit.

Nature of the Contribution

Influencing a discipline through written contributions involves two distinct tasks: knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination. To be effective, any single piece of written work that purports to contribute new knowledge has to do a good job of communicating—that is, “disseminating”—that contribution. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between (a) dissemination in the narrow sense of communicating in a clear and convincing fashion and (b) dissemination in the broader sense of synthesizing, reformulating, and propagating knowledge that already resides within a discipline. In this essay, “knowledge dissemination” is used in the latter, broader sense and as distinct from knowledge creation. As Figure 1 shows, I hypothesize that the nature of the contributions shifts from being primarily knowledge creation to primarily knowledge dissemination as we go down the list of channels. The relative positions of some of the channels—especially adjacent ones—along the creation-dissemination continuum may be debatable, but my intent here is more to highlight the possibility of variations across the channels than to suggest a rigid rank ordering.

Endurance of the Contribution

Endurance refers to the *degree to which a written contribution continues to stimulate scholarly thought and spawn additional research*—that is, the degree to which the work continues to contribute to the discipline's knowledge-creation activities. As Figure 1 shows, I posit that the endurance of contributions made through the various channels will parallel their positions along the knowledge creation-dissemination continuum. As in the case of the nature of contributions made through the various channels, the relative positions of some of the adjacent channels along the endurance continuum may be moot as well, but there is likely to be agreement on the overall pattern of ranks in Figure 1.

Target of the Contribution

The previously mentioned multiple means through which research and written contributions can influence a discipline imply a corresponding set of targets—namely, research scholars, Ph.D. students, thoughtful practitioners, managers in general, and non-Ph.D. students. Each of these groups is a potential target for work appearing in any of the six channels. However, as Figure 1 shows, it is reasonable to accept that not all targets will be primary targets of every channel.

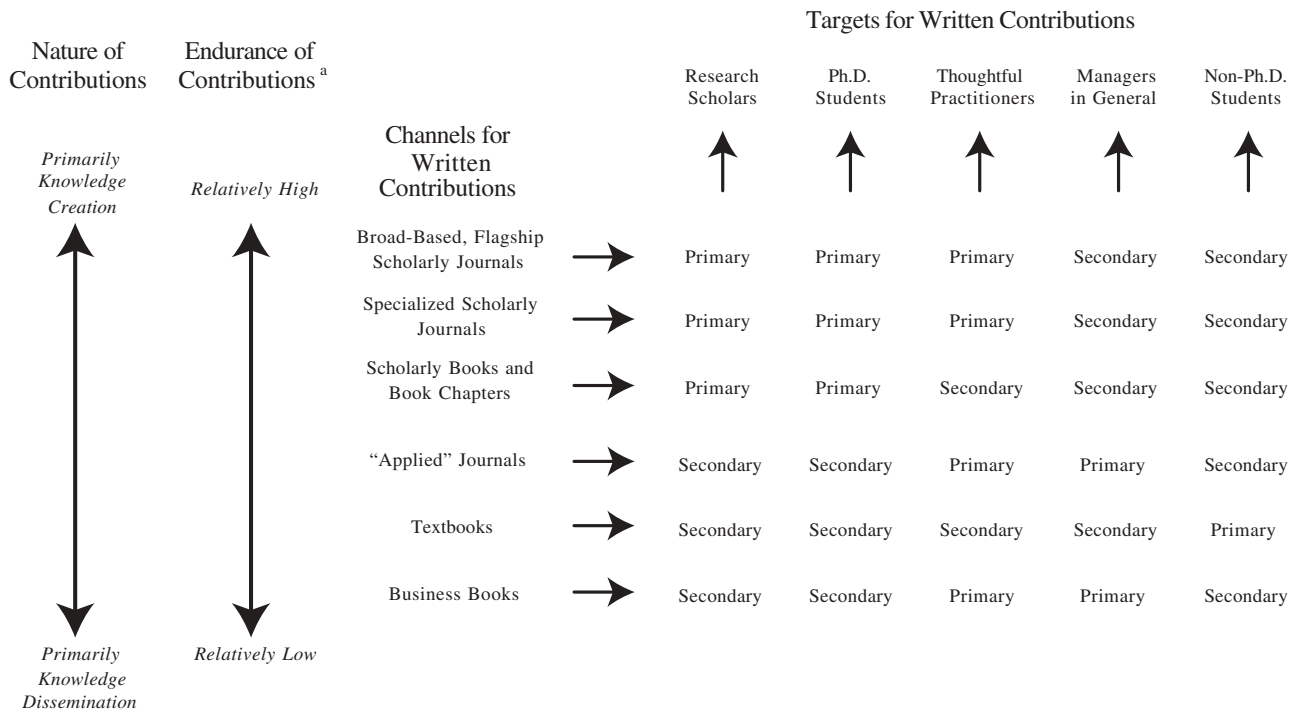
IMPLICATIONS OF THE TYPOLOGY FOR MAKING AN IMPACT ON A DISCIPLINE

It is important—especially for “young” scholars who are about to commence or in early stages of their academic careers—to have a well-thought-out publication strategy in order to maximize the probability of making a significant impact on the field and minimize the probability of mental anguish and wasted efforts. The optimal strategy for maximizing publication gain with minimum pain will differ across individuals depending on their doctoral training, areas of interest, skill sets, professional proclivities, and so on. As such, it is neither possible nor appropriate to recommend a one-size-fits-all publication strategy. Instead, in the remainder of this essay, I offer and discuss four general observations based on the typology with the hope that colleagues will find them helpful in developing or reformulating their personal publication strategies.

Observation 1: All Publication Channels and Targets Merit Consideration

As the typology in Figure 1 shows, multiple pathways linking publication channels and targets are available to those desiring to make an impact on a discipline. Within

FIGURE 1
A Typology of Research and Writing Contributions



a. *Endurance* refers to the degree to which a written contribution continues to stimulate scholarly thought and spawn additional research.

our own discipline, the written-contribution portfolios of renowned colleagues who have made significant and sustained contributions vary in terms of number and mix of channels and targets. Some have made their mark—and continue to reinforce it—by concentrating much of their research and writing on just one type of channel (e.g., flagship scholarly journals or textbooks), others have apportioned their efforts among a subset of channels, and yet others have made notable contributions through all channels. Thus, it is possible to contribute significantly to the discipline by focusing on one, a few, or all of the publication pathways depicted in the typology. All pathways warrant serious consideration in putting together one’s publication strategy.

Observation 2: Some Publication Pathways Are More Appropriate Than Others in Early Career Stages

Despite the high contribution potential of all publication pathways (Observation 1), *beginning* scholars would do well to focus their research and writing efforts mostly (if not exclusively) on pathways that are toward the upper ends of the continua representing the nature and endurance

of the contributions. There are several related reasons for this suggestion:

1. Publishing in the discipline’s scholarly journals is a critical milestone that terminally qualified, tenure-track college faculty must cross in order to demonstrate their distinctiveness from other types of faculty. As mentioned previously, the *defining* characteristic of tenure-track faculty is the ability to add to a discipline’s knowledge base by conducting and publishing high-quality, original research. Moreover, publishing through channels positioned along the bottom half of the continua in the typology can be—and is being—done by writers who are not all college faculty, let alone tenure-track faculty.
2. For most college professors, the best window of opportunity to publish in the discipline’s leading journals begins as they transition out of their Ph.D. programs and lasts through the formative years of their academic careers. Having just come off their Ph.D. programs, they are likely to possess three important ingredients for producing strong manuscripts that have high potential for enhancing the discipline’s knowledge base and hence being published in scholarly journals:

- (a) current and extensive knowledge of the literatures pertaining to their dissertation domains, (b) a fresh and original piece of research (i.e., their dissertation), and (c) a minimum of service commitments that invariably escalate during later career stages. All three ingredients deteriorate over time. Therefore, a different or diffused publication focus early in one's career (e.g., getting involved in book-writing projects) is tantamount to squandering a valuable (and perhaps only) opportunity to publish in leading scholarly journals.
3. Establishing and consolidating one's academic credentials through publishing in scholarly journals paves the way for greater success later on with publications through pathways aligned with the lower ranges of the continua in the typology. For instance, books (be they scholarly books, textbooks, or business books) written by authors with strong scholarly credentials are likely to be more widely read and have much greater impact than other books.

Observation 3: It Is Advisable to Consider Multiple and Varied Journals Within the Realm of Scholarly Publishing

Publishing one's research in the discipline's flagship scholarly journals is ideal. However, the harsh reality is that a vast majority of articles submitted to leading journals are rejected and not necessarily because they are all of poor quality. As Summers (2001) observed in his treatise on guidelines for getting published in scholarly journals, "For most top journals, there isn't a dramatic drop in quality between the top 10 percent of manuscripts received and the next best 10 percent, and most of the manuscripts submitted to the leading journals are reasonably well-done" (p. 405). Leading scholars in our discipline have offered insightful suggestions for conducting research and crafting manuscripts that have an increased likelihood of being accepted at top journals (e.g., Stewart 2002; Summers 2001; Varadarajan 1996). Nevertheless, insufficient space in our flagship journals is an important practical barrier to their being able to publish all high-quality manuscripts they receive. The pathways at the top of the typology are simply too narrow to accommodate the large volume of traffic attempting to navigate them.

To balance the desire to publish all of their work in flagship journals against the reality that acceptance rates at those journals are quite low, scholars in early stages of their careers might consider (a) broadening their evoked sets of potential journal outlets; (b) increasing the number and variety of manuscripts they produce so that they can place some of their work in the review process at each type

of journal in their evoked sets; (c) studying the nature, content, and requirements of each journal; and (d) ensuring that there is a good fit between the journal and the paper being submitted to it. Carefully following such a systematic approach can increase the chances of acceptance at the first journal to which a manuscript is submitted, reduce the amount of time the manuscript spends bouncing around from journal to journal (as the tenure clock continues to tick!), and minimize the author's mental anguish and frustration. Getting that first acceptance letter from a good journal (even if it is not the discipline's flagship journal) early in one's career can be a great confidence builder and a stress reducer.

Observation 4: Traversing All Publication Pathways Will Leave the Most Widespread and In-Depth Imprint

Influencing a discipline's knowledge base, practice, and pedagogy through one's research and writing is the epitome of making truly pervasive contributions to the field. Doing so requires passing through most or all pathways in the typology. However, it is not necessary to cover all pathways at once. In fact, as discussed under Observation 2, scholars just commencing their careers would be ill-advised to stray from the pathways at the top of the typology. Moreover, because the resources (especially time) available for research and writing are finite, it is difficult for even scholars in later stages of their careers to cover all pathways simultaneously and excel along each. To have a far-reaching impact on the discipline and to do so effectively and efficiently, scholars could pursue a "longitudinal," multipathway strategy wherein they (a) add pathways to their publication portfolios over time, in roughly the same top-to-bottom sequence as in the typology; (b) strive for synergy between the content areas of the newly added and already traversed pathways; and (c) if necessary, decrease the relative emphasis on pathways already traversed in order to focus sufficient attention on newly added pathways.

It is possible to make significant contributions by pursuing just one or a few pathways in the typology, as mentioned under Observation 1. Indeed, some scholars who have had sustained success in, say, publishing their work in the discipline's flagship journals may want to stay focused on that particular pathway to maximize their contributions to the discipline's core body of knowledge, a highly commendable pursuit. Therefore, a longitudinal, multipathway strategy is not always necessary or appropriate. However, something akin to such a strategy may be called for if one's goal is to have a *far-reaching* impact on the discipline.

In closing, let me reiterate that my reflections in this essay—including my opening premise that the research role (among the three principal roles of academics) is the defining characteristic of terminally qualified, tenure-track faculty—are open to debate. If a scholarly discourse ensues from this essay, it will have served a useful purpose. If, in addition, the proposed typology and my observations based on it are of some help in formulating publication strategies, that would be icing on the cake!

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