
THE ORIGINS OF SCHOLARSHIP RECONSIDERED

Drew Moser and Todd C. Ream

Ernest L. Boyer became a household name in the 1980s and 1990s as he was a go-to public intellectual on all matters of education. His rise to prominence from SUNY chancellor to US Commissioner of Education under President Carter to president of the Carnegie Foundation is well known. Likewise, his most famous published work, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*,¹ persists in the academy, evidenced by citations and sales. What is lesser known is the convergence of influences and life experiences that informed *Scholarship Reconsidered*. This essay chronicles these lesser-known details, exploring elements of Boyer's early life and his leadership style that shaped one of the most popular works in higher education literature. It addresses formative family influences, humble religious and academic beginnings, and a higher education landscape hungry for new ideas on scholarship.

Scholarship Reconsidered was a timely, albeit controversial, report. Ever the educational populist, Ernest L. Boyer desired that the practice of scholarship be a focus of national discussion, reaching well beyond the ivory tower. In addition, the Carnegie Foundation's *Campus Life*² report revealed that the current use of time by faculty members was a significant hindrance to the type of campus community Boyer envisioned. He lamented the "publish-or-perish" reality faculty members faced and challenged the nation to reconsider the definition of scholarship.

Original research was formally introduced to American higher education in the latter half of the 1800s and quickly became the focus of the professoriate at a number of universities, often at the expense of teaching and service. Boyer pointed his audience back to scholars who predated modern universities, reminding his audience that scholarship was once measured by the ability to think, learn, and communicate. Reports such as *Campus Life* and *Scholarship Reconsidered* also revealed the dissonance between what faculty members valued and the reward structure that measured their efforts. In particular, the majority of faculty members truly desired to teach and spend time interacting with students. The dominant structure of the modern university, however, rewarded faculty members who successfully removed themselves from the classroom (often to be replaced by graduate assistants) to spend more time on research.

Boyer's previous speeches and writing on scholarship argued the university, or at least its most influential iteration, the research university, embraced a narrow view of scholarship. How can scholarship simply be evidenced by publications? By looking back into history as well as forward into the future, Boyer then proposed a broader vision where "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."³

After experiencing grinding economic recessions during his time at SUNY and the United States Office of Education, Boyer steered the resources and expertise of the Carnegie Foundation toward addressing the public's growing demand for college faculty members to be accountable to powers other than themselves. At the same time, those same faculty members were growing more disillusioned with their own vocational culture. Laments over the demise of the academy were surfacing at that time in greater numbers and with greater force. For example, a work such as Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*⁴ was a cultural bombshell. If released now, however, Bloom's work would likely find itself competing with titles in what has become a well-established genre.

Although these details are known to the majority of higher education scholars, leaders, and policy makers, a number of other critical influences on Boyer and *Scholarship Reconsidered* deserve further exploration. Boyer's childhood and early life, which are less well known, played a vital role in shaping the type of educational leader that made Boyer so admired. For starters, he was not the traditional public intellectual. He came from humble beginnings with an educational background to match. This very background and subsequent leadership style also inspired and frustrated individuals who worked with him.

In particular, Boyer was a tireless worker and expected those around him to maintain his frenetic pace. He surrounded himself with brilliant scholars who provided the Carnegie Foundation with compelling research reports that usually carried one name as the author—Ernest L. Boyer. This constituency of one proved somewhat controversial but effective. It brought with it the full force of Boyer’s dogged work ethic, charismatic persona, and brand-name recognition. Together they were the recipe for one of the best-selling works in the history of American higher education.

To understand what made *Scholarship Reconsidered* so unique, one must consider the individuals who had a pronounced influence on Ernest Boyer; the Rev. William Boyer, Ernest Boyer’s paternal grandfather, was one such influence. Later in life, when Ernest was a much sought-after speaker, he would often refer to his grandfather as the most important person in his childhood. In particular, William Boyer became known for his commitment to service. A minister in Dayton, Ohio, William founded and led the Dayton Mission for thirty-three years. The residents of Dayton, who depended in many ways on the mission’s charity, were “a part of Ernie’s life. . . .”⁵ It was at the Dayton Mission that Ernest encountered poverty and suffering. He attended services multiple times per week, worshipping with and serving people from all walks of life.

From his grandfather, Ernest Boyer also developed an appreciation for the power of words. He admired his grandfather immensely for his compassionate spirit, his way with children, and his ability to listen. In his own words, “Grandpa taught me by example lessons I could not have learned in any classroom. He taught me that God is central to all of life, and he taught me to be truly human, one must serve.”⁶ William Boyer’s influence on his grandson was so profound that Ernest Boyer sought to integrate service into every leadership position he held.

Boyer’s first academic post was at a small, now defunct, church-related, liberal arts college in Southern California then known as Upland College. Upland provided him with an income while he earned his PhD at the University of Southern California. The college was a sister school to his alma mater, Messiah College, a Brethren-in-Christ-affiliated college in Pennsylvania. At Upland, Boyer devoted himself to the tight-knit yet fledgling institution. He gradually rose through the faculty ranks, spending two years as an instructor, two as an assistant professor and department chair, and five as academic dean, leading the institution to accreditation. In particular, Upland’s vibrant campus community, a campus that extended well beyond the classroom, left a profound impact on Boyer.

In particular, Boyer’s experience hardened his resolve to allow such schools a seat at the table of American higher education. Eager to replicate

the accreditation success, Boyer and Upland's president, John Martin, were instrumental in the founding of the Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges, a group that helped small colleges navigate through the accreditation process. They coached small college administrators and lobbied accrediting bodies to not only consider classic metrics but also to give weight to what their graduates contributed to the world.⁷ As a result of the council's efforts, ninety small colleges received accreditation, including Boyer's alma mater, Messiah College.

Ironically, as Upland's fiscal strength waned, Boyer's career began to soar. After a few posts in California's public higher education system, Boyer followed his mentor, Sam Gould, to Albany, New York, and the State University of New York (SUNY). Boyer eventually became chancellor of the SUNY system at the age of forty-two and began to place his own stamp on the largest, most complex state system in the country at that time.

While in Albany, Boyer faced a set of challenges comparable to what we face today—the need to increase access and student learning with fewer and fewer resources. Part of his answer was to create structures such as Empire State College, initially a campusless institution, now multi-site and virtual, that served as an early template for adult education and degree completion. Even today, Empire State's mission is to “use innovative, alternative and flexible approaches to higher education that transform people and communities by providing rigorous programs that connect individuals' unique and diverse lives to their personal learning goals.”⁸ Such efforts drew heavily on the emerging realities of the college student experience and the phenomenon now referred to as adjunct professors.

When looking back at Boyer's writings from that time, a quick survey reveals a convergence of his key philosophical tenets of education: connectedness, service, language, and teaching. Boyer insisted on viewing education in an integrated, holistic manner. If these attributes are the building blocks of a quality education, they must have an impact on scholarship within college education. In essence, scholarship must have a connection to a community. Scholarship for scholarship's sake was not an option. It must serve the common good and thus must use language effectively to foster learning. Such attributes reflect the essence of Boyer's call for an education of coherence.

After ten years at the helm in the SUNY system, Boyer was appointed United States Commissioner of Education by President Jimmy Carter in 1977. After two frustrating years in Washington, Boyer accepted his dream job as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching—a tenure that began in 1979 and would end with his untimely

death in 1995. He succeeded Clark Kerr, who had hired scholars such as Art Levine. Boyer thus inherited the Carnegie Foundation's resources, library, and rising array of scholars. Boyer placed the foundation's headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey, because of its proximity to government agencies, money, and East Coast media outlets. Levine recalls, "He [Boyer] is probably the smartest person I've ever worked with in my life. Also the most difficult ..." (personal communication, June 3, 2014).

Boyer's strategic, sharp intellect coupled with his tireless work ethic produced a decade of important reports, such as *A Quest for Common Learning* (with Art Levine, on general education); *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*; *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*; and *Campus Life: In Search of Community*.⁹ These reports were read and considered, but none to the level of *Scholarship Reconsidered*.

In the late 1980s, a close friend of Boyer's, Dick Martin, handed Boyer some writings by a rising education scholar by the name of Eugene Rice. Rice, then a professor of sociology and religion at the University of the Pacific, was beginning to unfold some innovative ideas about the academic profession. Boyer was so compelled that he convinced Rice to join the Carnegie Foundation as a senior fellow in 1988 (Rice, personal communication, April 15, 2014).

At the time, Rice was already years into working on a project called *The New American Scholar*. According to Rice (personal communication, April 15, 2014), Boyer invited him to finish his book at the Carnegie Foundation. Rice would then spend two years at the foundation before accepting a post at Antioch College. He left his *New American Scholar* manuscript at the foundation with the expectation that it would be published as a collaborative effort between Rice and Boyer.

At this point the origins of *Scholarship Reconsidered* provide a case study in the differences between higher education and the philanthropic world. Boyer gave the keynote address at the annual meeting of the American Association of Higher Education, an address entitled "The New American Scholar," borrowing heavily from Rice's work.¹⁰ This would be considered inappropriate by some in academic circles. Yet it points to a more commonly held philanthropic approach: the constituency of one. Rice, a scholar by trade, likely envisioned his work for the foundation as something explicitly attributed to him. However, foundations often operate with a different understanding. In particular, Boyer believed the foundation ought to speak with one voice. To this end, Rice was sufficiently forewarned prior to joining the Carnegie Foundation of Boyer's "one voice" mentality (Rice, personal communication, April 15, 2014).

Though controversial, Boyer's approach had the intended effect and Rice's work likely had more impact because of Boyer's approach. Rice remarked, "In fact *Scholarship Reconsidered* or *The New American Scholar* had more impact because he did what he did. . . . But I think there is a lot to be said for Ernie's approach and the need for one voice and I think that is why *Scholarship Reconsidered* really moved ahead" (personal communication, April 15, 2014). Boyer began with Rice's manuscript, added survey data of more than five thousand faculty members, made considerable revisions, and placed a new title on the project: *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. One name was then placed in the author's line—Ernest L. Boyer, President, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Boyer and his team at the foundation spent much of 1989 surveying, collecting, and analyzing data from the more than five thousand faculty members from all types of higher education institutions.¹¹ The survey asked questions related to teaching, research, tenure, and professional satisfaction. The results were stunning—over 70 percent of the faculty reported a strong interest in teaching, many of whom advocated that teaching be a primary criterion for promotion.¹² Charles Glassick, another Carnegie Foundation senior fellow, concluded, "Clearly, the majority of faculty considered teaching to be a central mission and enjoyed the time they spent with students."¹³

These results revealed the dissonance between what faculty members valued and what they were rewarded for accomplishing. The majority of faculty members desired to teach and spend time interacting with students. The dominant reward structure of the modern university recognized faculty members who could successfully distance themselves from the classroom so that they could spend more time on research. However, the quality of that research was difficult to determine.

More than a third of the faculty respondents reported their institutions simply counted publications regardless of their quality.¹⁴ Even at research universities, 42 percent agreed a systemic lack of quality control in scholarship existed. Boyer's speeches and writings on scholarship thus proposed a broader vision of scholarship.

The nuance may initially seem slight, but it nonetheless proved profound. The focal point of Ernest Boyer's work was not necessarily the scholar but the student. Peer review played a role in scholarship but was merely a means to the end of a Boyerian approach—effective communication to students. In other words, Boyer viewed scholarship as a

highly communal act. In a speech to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he explained:

You never get tenured for research alone. You get tenured for research and publication, which means you have to teach somebody what you've learned. And academics must continue to communicate, not only with their peers, but also with future scholars in the classroom in order to keep the flame of scholarship alive.¹⁵

A communal act for the sake of student learning was not the traditional milieu of American scholarship. However, for Boyer, whose writings and speeches reveal a convergence of his key philosophical tenets of education (connectedness, service, language, and teaching), it proved to be a logical extension. If these attributes are the building blocks of a quality education, they must have an impact on scholarship within collegiate education. A Boyerian view of scholarship requires a connection to a community. Scholarship for scholarship's sake is wasteful. It must serve the common good, and this commitment was the essence of his call for an education of coherence.¹⁶

As a result, Boyer's most popular work, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, was written and released to the American public. He wanted to shift the paradigm of scholarship to value qualities universities had lost: community, service, and teaching. He thus proposed a view of scholarship that included four domains: application, discovery, integration, and teaching.

He sent a pre-publication manuscript of the report to an anonymous, yet reportedly distinguished, Princeton historian to garner feedback. Boyer included a note in the manuscript with the following disclaimer: "I don't think you'll like it very much, but please give it a read." The historian responded, "You're right! I don't like it very much."¹⁷ Ernest also sent a copy to his brother Paul, another distinguished American historian at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Paul's response was similar, albeit a bit more sympathetic.

Boyer accepted the critique yet remained convinced that scholarship could prove excellent and accessible—the mantra of his tenure as US Commissioner of Education and the Carnegie Foundation. If education can pursue both excellence and access, then scholarship should as well. The initial response to *Scholarship Reconsidered* was a foretaste of what was to come. It became Boyer's most influential work because, in many ways, it also proved to be his most controversial. Glenn R. Bucher and Jennell

J. Patton provide a helpful response through which to explore Boyer's view of scholarship:

To understand *Scholarship Reconsidered* . . . is to see it as moving the notion of service into the center of the academic enterprise. [Boyer] proposed the scholarships of application, discovery, integration, and teaching partly as a critique of more elitist notions of university research. Then he offered the scholarship of engagement as an encompassing category, one that continues to require further development.¹⁸

The report quickly became a Carnegie Foundation best-seller yet, according to Charles E. Glassick, *Scholarship Reconsidered* “clearly had struck a nerve in higher education.”¹⁹ The response was mixed and passionate. Regardless of whether scholars loved or loathed his four domains, Ernest Boyer provided a much-desired vocabulary for a national debate on the issue of scholarship. In Glassick's estimation, “*Scholarship Reconsidered* lacked specificity, [but] its concepts . . . were immediately recognized as important new proposals in a field that was ripe for revision.”²⁰

The majority of responses to Boyer's views of scholarship were positive. Many praised *Scholarship Reconsidered* for expanding the thinking of the academy to a broader definition of scholarship.²¹ Others also praised Boyer for not just challenging the reigning definition of scholarship but also fostering comprehensive reform to higher education. One group of scholars wrote:

A broadened view of scholarship that is congruent with progressive missions invites changes in the academic culture that touch faculty roles, reward systems, disciplinary boundaries, and changing purposes. . . . Learning becomes the measure of success rather than teaching—a challenging but worthy endeavor.²²

Stephen G. Estes may have summed it up best when he wrote that “Boyer's approach to scholarship is *scholarly*. . . . Boyer was a scholar of scholarship.”²³

Scholars and administrators welcomed the four domains as a breath of fresh air. Others liked portions of Boyer's view, accepting some while critiquing others. Michael Paulsen and Kenneth Feldman mostly praised Boyer's efforts, but they suggested replacing the scholarship of integration with their own “scholarship of academic citizenship.”²⁴

A large number of scholars were critical of Boyer's entire framework. Alexander McNeil proved one of the strongest critics. In particular, he admitted that Boyer's intention to broaden scholarship was noble, conceding that the report raised the collective consciousness surrounding scholarship in higher education. However, he strongly critiqued Boyer's scholarship of teaching: "Boyer's intention is to broaden our concept of scholarship within the university. But he has succeeded only in clouding the issue. Part of the cloudiness results from his failure to draw a relationship between teaching and learning."²⁵ Alan Rubin was also not impressed, claiming that Boyer's view of scholarship only succeeded in leading to a "scholarship of confusion."²⁶ His primary concern was that Boyer was dangerously inclusive. Should everything an academic does be defined as scholarship? If so, does this not diminish the quality of scholarship? Rubin believed "it fosters the potential for superficial work, isolation and division, and the lack of common or shared values."²⁷

Clearly, Boyer's view of scholarship was controversial in higher education. Glassick then summarized the tension well, explaining that an expanded definition of scholarship was generally well received, but two main areas provided stumbling blocks.²⁸ First, what is the meaning of the scholarship of teaching? Second, how should the quality of scholarship be assessed?

Regardless of one's view of teaching's scholarly validity, Boyer achieved what he set out to do with all of his reports—he started a conversation that elevated teaching from the fringes of higher education to the center. Rarely in Boyer's career did he intend to provide definitive answers; rather, he was more comfortable providing the framework for a vibrant discussion. For individuals who found great joy in the act of teaching at the university level, Boyer provided legitimacy. For individuals who focused solely on traditional research and publication, Boyer provided a challenge.

Boyer's view of scholarship served as a catalyst for conversation on the nature and purpose of higher education in the United States and his work is still relevant today. It endures as part of the national conversation on higher education.²⁹ On one level, it continues to be a prominent text in the canon of higher education literature. On a more critical level, it serves as a powerful point of convergence of Boyer's experience and theology. It weaves his love for the diversity of higher education and his vision for university renewal. This vision for renewal flowed out of a deep call to service where he sought the connectedness of all things expressed through language.

This connected expression of learning was then placed in the context of a community that served one another. Scholarship is a prime example of Boyer's ability to go beneath the surface of an issue. When many saw the need to change tenure or promotion policies and procedures, Boyer saw a broken community that had lost touch with its roots. The state of scholarship in the academy was merely the symptom of a larger problem. In essence, the professoriate had lost its connectivity to one another, its students, and to the wider public.

In *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Boyer accomplished what most others were unable to do: provide a new lens through which to consider the work of the academy. He alone was uniquely positioned for this role, because his story differed from any common trajectory of higher education leaders. It is these lesser known parts of his story that shaped this framework for scholarship. Boyer's background consists of a childhood at the side of his preaching grandfather; a humble academic background in small, faith-based liberal arts colleges; a charismatic public persona; and a capacity to leverage his stature by surrounding himself with key people to carry out his agenda. Boyer's life was lived through a unique lens, one he shared with the academy. This uniqueness is likely why his views are sometimes critiqued for being impractical or vague. Yet, in the twenty-five years since *Scholarship Reconsidered's* release, we still wait for someone to publish anything that comes close to Boyer's persisting, central place in conversations about scholarship in the academy.