



## From the Desk of the President *Building a Stimulating and Sustainable Research Enterprise*

**H**appy New Year! Jules Henri Poincaré stated, “To doubt everything or to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection” (cited in Bartlett, 2002, p. 603). One significant role of a scholarly community is to serve as a place of critical reflection about matters such as problem definition, theory, method, and interpretation. We should all share a collective desire to build on our strengths as a profession in support of the advancement toward a sustainable, reflective education research enterprise here and abroad. Researchers in other disciplines have the same concerns. Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings (2007) reported on a project involving 84 academic departments in six fields, including education. One purpose of the project was to improve the effectiveness of doctoral study in the selected fields. The authors’ succinct highlights of the larger project’s findings, described in the *Chronicle Review*, were insightful. I will take the liberty of providing a metalevel theme that is associated both directly and indirectly with each of the project’s major findings: “Create as many opportunities for community-centered reflection as possible.”

I would like to discuss one project finding: that sharing research ideas across boundaries is an element of a strong intellectual community. Walker et al. (2007) stated:

Every department has program subareas, and those are often lively intellectual communities in themselves. One strategy for creating intellectual community is to create research seminars that bridge subspecialties; such connections are especially important as disciplinary boundaries blur. Connections with others in different subareas can lead to new collaborations. (p. B7)

The development of shared intellectual spaces to discuss scholarship across boundaries is not a new idea (Padilla, 2005; Trow, 1998). Yet it is often elusive in practice. Despite the challenges associated with building a cross-boundary community structure, this particular project finding strikes me as a very important point to emphasize. Moreover, I think it can and should be expanded. Education research is not limited to departments or even schools of education. Colleagues in economics, sociology, anthropology, history, political science, theology, applied statistics, pediatrics, psychology, social work, law, public policy, business, nursing, biology, physics, mathematics, and other fields housed in many different academic units are engaged in scholarly inquiry

directly related to improving educational processes. A Nobel Prize-winning economist is conducting research on one of America’s most pressing domestic problems: high school dropouts (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). He joins other social scientists deeply interested in this area, including some who have published their research in AERA journals (e.g., Warren & Halpern-Manners, 2007). The dropout topic is linked to research in many fields, including developmental and community psychology, labor economics, criminology, social welfare, sociology, urban studies, literacy, and other subareas of curriculum studies.

It is time for more education research seminars and other venues that support reflection. Moreover, this effort should extend across our campuses and organizations. I was recently invited to a seminar held here at Washington University in St. Louis, sponsored by the George Warren Brown School of Social Work. Such invitations are not unusual on our campus. However, the intent of the individual doing the inviting is relevant to this discussion. The invitation was from a graduate student in the School of Social Work. She was calling a meeting of everyone she could find on campus with an interest in urban education and related research. In follow-up communications she indicated a desire to build a campus community in this area beyond her department and her designated training function in social work. Walker et al. (2007) suggested that students be called on to organize boundary-crossing activities. I understand why. Graduate students want to grow intellectually; moreover, developing the boundary-crossing habit as a graduate student is great training for community building in the postdoctoral career stage.

I believe education researchers should dare to be different. I know of universities and other research organizations that have some level of cross-boundary discussion. The intensity level and extent of institutional traction varies widely. Yet these rare places have an opportunity to take one additional step. Imagine a university with a functioning cross-disciplinary group of scholars focused on the dropout problem (or any number of challenges) in a metropolitan area. This type of research group represents a vital yet missing element for many leaders in education and human services agencies. Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi (2001) argued that collective cognition matters when the goal is to engage in extraordinary problem solving in school reform. If universities and other research organizations establish theories of action that include the development of effective cross-boundary

research-based deliberations involving other relevant community leaders, then I predict that the future of the research enterprise in education will be very different from that in the social sciences and many other research fields associated with professional schools. Education research, when linked to a theory of action that calls for a broad set of stakeholders to engage in and reflect on the scholarship, has the potential to set informed change in motion (Atkinson & Jackson, 1992).

Providing a supportive context for reflection is only one role of the intellectual community. Another significant role is to recruit new members. The challenge of recruitment is highlighted in a recent article in *Science*, titled "Robots' Allure: Can It Remedy What Ails Computer Science?" (Lester, 2007). One computer scientist noted that the traditional method of teaching computer science is to provide a dry assignment such as writing a program to generate a mathematical sequence. The assignments are often uninteresting to students, and perhaps as a result, many choose to study in another field. In response, many computer science departments are designing creative entry-level experiences, such as the Institute for Personal Robotics in Education. The link between robotics and programming provides an intellectually stimulating environment in which to both teach and attract potential computer scientists. Do we have analogs in education research to attract the best and brightest minds to study educational processes?

I would like to hear from you about strategies for recruiting talent to the field of education research. Please provide me with ideas and examples from your campus or research organization. I will share a few of your examples in my final "From the Desk" column. This is a serious matter, and the community should share its very best recruitment methods.

On a continuous basis, AERA is engaged in creating a context to support collective reflection on significant matters of research. The Association can also be a tool to assist in the recruiting of new talent to the field. Our upcoming Annual Meeting in New York

City represents an opportunity for you to engage with colleagues from around the world. In addition, the Meeting's professional development and training courses provide stimulating ways of advancing a human resources agenda in education research (for course information, see *Educational Researcher*, December 2007, pp. 595–600). I look forward to seeing you in New York City for a time of reflection about education research.

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