

The Importance of Being Pracademic

Nancy L. Macduff
Macduff/Bunt Associates
925 "E" Street, Walla Walla, Washington 99362-3235
Adjunct Faculty
Volunteer Engagement and Leadership Program
Portland State University, Portland, OR
Tel. 509-529-0244 * FAX: 509-529-8865 * E-mail: mba@bmi.net

F. Ellen Netting, Ph.D.
Professor & Samuel S. Wurtzel Endowed Chair
School of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University
1001 W. Franklin St., Richmond, VA 23284-2027
Tel. 804-828-0404 * FAX: 804-747-5477 * E-mail: enetting@vcu.edu

Abstract

The authors (an academic and a practitioner, both who define themselves as "pracademics") comment on their experiences over many years of conducting workshops and doing presentations at national and international volunteerism conferences in which they have repeatedly posed the question, "What is a 'pracademic' and how is it related to professionalism?". A typical response is, "that's what I am, but I've never quite known what to call myself" since such an individual identifies with the concept of having one foot in the academy and one foot in the practice environment. This commentary defines the essential nature of being a "pracademic" and its implications for volunteer resource managers.

Key Words:

academic, collaboration, practice, practitioner, professional

The Association for Research on Nonprofits Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) hosts an annual conference of scholars and practitioners in the field of volunteerism. There are social workers interested in volunteer engagement in social service organizations and who lead social agencies; there are economists who study philanthropic behavior, and development directors of large organizations who are responsible for raising money; there are sociologists who study trends in how people are choosing to give service, and professional managers of volunteer programs seeking insight into why so many people want short term volunteer assignments. Gathered are professionals who have both

vested interests in the academy as well as the real world of practice, and professional practitioners who are engaged in research.

For decades the term "pracademic" has surfaced in paper presentation sessions, panels, and colloquies at ARNOVA conferences. Conferees would meet in the halls and assert that they were a hybrid species called "pracademics." The outcome of these conversations at the ARNOVA conference resulted in the formation in 2006 of a special and distinct conference section for "pracademics," establishing a home within the ARNOVA organization for those who identified with both nonprofit/voluntary action study and practice.

Defining a “Pracademic”

Several years ago we began a search for the origins of the word “pracademic.” Volpe and Chandler (2001) take responsibility for coining the term over 25 years ago “to describe academics who are scholars and teachers in the field of dispute resolution and actually practice what they preach in their university” (p. 1). They placed the origins of pracademicians within the academy from which academics ventured out into the real world of practice to resolve conflicts, and credit the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in the mid 1980s with having funded 20 universities to “develop practice-relevant theory in conflict analysis and resolution” (p. 1).

Subsequently, in the late 1980s the Clarion Conference convened a group of academics interested in developing nonprofit management as a discipline. A parenthetical remark in one of the published papers indicated that a substantial number of attendees “adopted the moniker ‘pracademician’ to reflect their hybrid status as academicians with significant experience as nonprofit professional practitioners” (Rubin, Adamski, & Block, 1989, p. 280).

Today the terms “pracademic” and “pracademician” are proliferating as scholars and practitioners alike search for words to describe and define their unique skills, emphasize the importance of the practitioner-researcher relationships, or develop new partnerships between communities and universities (Hanbury, 2004; Hess & Mullen, 1995; Morrow-Howell & Noelker, 2006; Nalbandian, 1994; Ospina & Dodge, 2004; Price, 2001; Wenger, 1998; Wildman, 2002.) In 2008, we published an article in which we examined the concept of “pracademic”, and identified three approaches to professional “pracademic” work: 1) the engaged scholar, 2) the reflective professional practitioner, and 3) the collaborative team (Macduff & Netting, 2008). The engaged scholar resides

primarily in the academy, but truly believes in university-community partnerships at both the institutional and personal level, attempting to remain connected to both cultures. The reflective professional practitioner works primarily in the practice arena, but is intentionally respectful of scholarship and what it has to offer. The collaborative team is exemplified when the engaged scholar and reflective professional practitioner work together to draw from their joint strengths in building better capacity to collaborate.

Wisdom From Our Colleagues

Over the years, the authors have collected notes and comments from participant interaction during conference sessions that have led to a number of themes regarding “pracademics” from both the university and the world of practice. From the academic perspective, there are numerous advantages identified if one partners with professional practitioners. These include the potential for mutuality in terms of learning and in understanding expertise and constraints, and having the political will to implement a project requires maintaining relationships over time and ongoing communication. Knowing what the political agenda is and reducing the possibility of mixed messages seems to be enhanced by identifying the responsibilities of each party and knowing who’s responsible to do what within an agreed upon timeframe.

Conference participants have pointed out that this front-end investment in a collaborative agenda is critically important particularly for academics since the practice world works much faster than the academic world, often due to issues such as gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals related to human subjects concerns. This means nothing to volunteer resource managers.

Professional practitioners in our sessions agreed that mutual learning is a goal

for all parties and that nothing can replace honest, transparent dialogue. In a collaborative partnership, practitioners often look to persons based in the academy for skills in research design and implementation, whereas practitioners have clues to the real-world context in which data are to be interpreted. The professional practitioner is critical to the process of putting the procedures and protocols in place once the plan is in place, for without their cooperation and buy-in there will be limited implementation. This requires a respect on the part of all parties for one another and the recognition that these are equal partnerships and that both are professionals with converging skills sets.

In a more recent session we posed three questions: 1) how do you define “pracademic”? 2) what is the value of the “pracademic” to the academy?, and 3) what is the value of the academic to the field of practice? We received some provocative responses that may hold clues to the meaning of the concept of the professional practitioner, as well as the academic.

In defining “pracademic”, participants used active verbs such as “applying practice to research” and “doing research to inform practice”. Connectional terms such as intersecting, linking, involving, engaging, bridging, combining, synthesizing, spanning, melding, integrating, and collaborating also peppered the dialogue. One academic referred to the definition as “where concerned and empirical links are converted to practical solutions to issues,” and a “pracademic” referred to “practitioners who want to do something about the problems they see enough to totally uproot their lives, transform their thinking, and seek answers through research to take back to the world of practice.”

Asked what the value of the “pracademic” is to the academy, responses were that they bridge research to field

experience and are a great source of grounding and relevance, rooting a project in reality. Another participant talked about how the “pracademic” brings real life experience to the testing and correcting of theory (i.e., a reality check). One person described the “pracademic” as being engaged in interdisciplinary work and bringing contextualization to theory. Whereas participants acknowledged the value, one was quick to say that it could become problematic when practitioners with whom one is partnering are too busy to fully carry through as needed. Positives, however, were far more evident in terms such as crossing-over, offering different perspectives, informing the project, being synergistic, and giving “hope for answering the ‘so what’ question and providing a view of the trees.”

The value of the academic to the field of practice was seen as providing a theoretical base, having empirical knowledge on which to build, and understanding the systemic picture. Thus, if practitioners had a view of the trees, academics were seen as having a view of the forest. Caution was expressed over academics not getting “in the way of good practice” or exploiting practitioners because they are unable to make research applicable. Academics were viewed as only as good as their ability to communicate with practitioners. “The academic world helps us to step outside the immediacy of the world of practice, gain perspective, understand constructs and learn rigorous research methods, so that we can effectively address real-life problems.” Another participant added that the academic may take the “time ‘to breath,’ reflect, define blank spots and generate knowledge.”

Implications for Volunteer Resource Managers

The use of the term “pracademic” is spreading across professional fields, including that of the volunteer resource

manager as a practitioner. The term reflects what professionals have known for years; being professional by definition is having a foot in both worlds of practice and academe. Academic settings were designed with disciplines in mind, and disciples have long focused on basic research and theory from the top down. Professions and professional schools within the academy have often drawn from multiple disciplines and called their work “interdisciplinary” because they have drawn from various areas. Yet, “pracademics” take things one step farther in that they seek to apply what is learned from the disciplines and translate it into the world of practice. Without practice, a profession does not exist. Thus, professionals who warm to the bridging nature of the term “pracademic” are likely relieved to have a concept that gives a name to what they do – connecting practice to a mutually beneficial knowledge base.

“Pracademics” are also professionals (whether in the academy or the field, or both) who recognize the necessity of engagement throughout a process. It may be easier to put blinders on or use tunnel vision to navigate the practice world, but no one said that being a professional was easy. As one of our wise colleagues once noted, the practitioner is one who sees the trees and the academic is one who sees the forest. Whether it is through one person who can see both or in a collaboration that pulls from the strengths of engaged scholars and reflective practitioners, the “pracademic” way is to see both the forest and the trees as an integrated whole. We think the “pracademic” term is descriptive of what professionals who manage volunteer resources need to be in a highly complex world.

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About the Authors

Nancy Macduff spent more than ten years managing volunteers in the nonprofit and governmental sector. She currently teaches and consults regarding volunteer administration and nonprofit board development. She also is the primary teacher for the Volunteer Engagement and Leadership Program at Portland State University, Portland, OR, and is the author of numerous books, manuals, and articles on volunteer administration.

F. Ellen Netting began her social work career in the field of aging. She has directed an office on aging/senior center and a Foster Grandparent program, and has served as trainer for a 16 county area agency on aging. She teaches in the M.S.W. and Ph.D. programs at Virginia Commonwealth University and has authored numerous books, book chapters, and articles regarding nonprofit management, aging, and social work macro practice.