



Occasional Paper Series

Reclaiming Lost Ground: Creating Academic Coalitions

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Reclaiming Lost Ground: Creating Academic Coalitions

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What does it mean to be an educated person and citizen? And what is our interest, as a nation, in formal education? Such questions have shaped our national debate on education for the last two centuries effecting decisions about educational content, teaching strategies, standards, methods of evaluation and funding. On one side of the debate is the principle that the role of education is to prepare knowledgeable and thoughtful members for a society that requires informed judgment from its citizens. On the other side is the principle that education must provide practical preparation for industry and a good livelihood.

Historically, American higher education has moved between the poles of this debate, at times prioritizing one over the other but never letting go of either principle. But something has changed. Most dramatically, market-place forces have expanded like never before abetted by greater federal involvement in higher education. Many academics have played down or dismissed these changes and continue to assume higher education is protected by its tradition of self-governance and academic freedom.

Academics, though, are finding it much more difficult to keep key educational priorities in place and are experiencing formidable pressures to disrupt the balance between educational and market values. For example, higher education institutions, particularly public institutions, are required to adopt academic standards drawn directly from industry – measures of productivity (e.g. time to graduation) and efficiency (demonstrated quantitatively). Public

funding of education is tied increasingly to “high demand” areas of study; those areas are determined through a coalition of business and political interests. In addition to such external forces, the critical institutional conditions supportive of an independent-minded academic organization are being dismantled. College faculty look more and more like the labor force nationally; the majority of college faculty are on part-time, short term contracts with no guarantee of future employment or any opportunity for support for scholarship or for participating in academic governance. Academics are literally losing our place in the debate and are experiencing what Philip Selznick observed in other organizations:

Ideals go quickly by the board when the compelling realities of organizational life are permitted to run their natural course...[there is] a process at work wherever administrative and economic necessities – budget, personnel, productivity, cost, competition – override concern for personal and institutional integrity. Philip Selznick¹

The institutional conditions that have sustained American higher education as a center of learning and judgment – a secure labor force, opportunity for scholarship, ability to self-govern and determine standards, academic freedom – are being dismantled. No matter the quality of critique academics offer today, there is decreasing institutional capacity to withstand the economic and political forces of our time. These forces are not unique to higher education. They are being exerted throughout our society as we see a common diminishment of public and community life, in favor of “elite”² business and political interests. The critiques put forward of the federal response to Katrina and the war in Iraq recognize very similar problems to those at play in higher education.

¹ Selznick, Philip. *The Moral Commonwealth*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992

² “Elite” is a favorite word of disparagement by many talk show hosts these days. I am using it as C. Wright Mills did to identify those in positions of authority able to direct institutional and national priorities.

What accounts for the success of this legislatively driven centralization of a business-oriented movement in higher education today? And how can academics respond to these forces? I approach these questions as an anthropologist seeking a cultural and historic context in which to consider them. I have two proposals to make, both of which are meant to put academics back into the debate and decision-making about higher education. First, academics must build coalitions within and between colleagues at our respective colleges that are grounded in what makes academics so distinctive – rigorous and inquisitive thinkers whose commitment is to education, scholarship and the public good. Key to establishing such coalitions is the capacity to transcend those elements of our individual educations and careers (disciplines) that function now to isolate us from one another. Second, academics must go public – expressing ourselves in public forums and media, and participating *as academics* in community, cultural and governmental projects. Russell Jacoby referred to such academics as “public intellectuals.”³ In a recent commentary on the impact of his 1989 book, *The Last Intellectuals*, he finds that academics remain detached from public life. He wrote: “Younger intellectuals became professors who geared their work toward their colleagues and specialized journals...[These younger intellectuals] neither wanted to nor, after a while, could write accessible prose. The new thinkers became academic – not public – intellectuals, with little purchase outside professional circles.”⁴ If academics are to have a more substantive role in the debate and direction of higher education, coalitions must be built on our strengths and we must then become involved in more public discussions. My first proposal is meant to lay the groundwork for the second.

³ Jacoby, Russell. *The Last Intellectuals*. New York: Noonday Press, 1989

⁴ Jacoby, Russell. “Big Brains, Small Impact.” *The Chronicle Review*. January 11, 2008.

Proposal One: Building coalitions among academics.

Academic disciplines, and the departmental structures that sustain them within colleges, are both a source of collegiality and new scholarship while simultaneously constraining both scholarship and collegiality. Both phenomena are true and, like all cultural matters, must be made conscious for us to respond thoughtfully to them. Academics must sort out these dueling influences as an initial step of putting ourselves and our educational priorities back into the debates on education. One particularly troubling version of the constraints we experience is an absence of an explicit understanding of the historicity and development of the academic disciplines in which we were trained and now work within.

Most academics are not very good, day-to-day historians. While knowledgeable of the history of our fields and higher education, we tend not to “think historically” as we go about teaching and other faculty responsibilities. Ironically, the absence of that understanding has contributed not only to an apolitical but also anti-intellectual culture within most departments and colleges. While many faculty members would hope for greater collegiality, the unending competitiveness promoted through tenure reviews, determination of teaching load, and dispersal of other resources poses barriers among many college faculty, tending to deepen the isolation within which we work. Many academics take for granted the increased fragmentation between fields of study and the isolation created among colleagues. Knowledge and expertise are becoming more commodified, judged by measures of productivity and capacity to leverage resources and status.

From a cultural point of view, academics are in a real bind: the path available for greater learning leads many of us deeper into fragmented and isolated fields of study. The institutionalization of learning and scholarship, as it is practiced within professional

organizations and departments, rewards narrow areas of expertise and punishes those who work outside of established parameters of their fields. These two forces – the parameters of disciplines and their effect on inquiry, and the tangible conditions of employment that are the structures supporting those parameters – function synergistically and play right into the hands of broader economic forces.

To see academic disciplines as cultural and historic phenomena is similar to Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigm. In a careful reading of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Margaret Masterman found 21 qualities associated with paradigm⁵. For example, she noted the explicit knowledge embedded in a paradigm, academic departments that certify that knowledge, publishing companies that select books based on that knowledge, approaches to teaching that knowledge that end up attracting or discouraging students from pursuing that study, funding sources for research that promote current knowledge, etc.

To approach disciplines as paradigms is to acknowledge that education is a political practice and should compel academics to investigate the cultural and historic forces shaping discipline-based knowledge and the prescribed methods of acquiring it. Being credentialed and socialized in a discipline, as all faculty members have been, makes the hold of such paradigms pervasive and often invisible; simultaneously disciplines are the basis of what we know and how we tend to approach learning as well as being elements of our identity, status and livelihood. In other words, when viewed as paradigms, academic disciplines are deeply entrenched in both institutional practice and individual psyches (cognitive as well as emotional).

⁵ Masterman, Margaret. "The Nature of a Paradigm." *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds. London: Cambridge University Press, 1970

Michel Foucault's linguistic symbol *knowledge/power* helps get at what is so problematic with academic disciplines when understood as paradigms. Disciplines are simultaneously "knowledge" and the institutional relations of power and authority that secure legitimacy of disciplines. Formal and institutionalized knowledge is always situated in organizational structures and practices staffed with experts. The "canon wars" are a good example of this principle; some scholarship is promoted and others not, new areas of study are institutionalized in college curricula and others wither. Every academic field experiences changes and expansion of its body of knowledge. But underlying such change is a persistent reassertion of those institutional relations of power that drive higher education.

To historicize academic disciplines, and propose that education is a politicized process, is dangerous for faculty members. Here we can feel the bind around us again. The very conditions that make our work and employment possible require a certain kind of productivity to achieve standing, funding, etc. For a faculty member to step out of this frame could jeopardize publications, teaching load, etc. Some would say, more bitterly, there are those who would like us to be like the well-trained dog that can put a leash in its mouth and take itself for a walk.⁶

How does such a perspective on academic disciplines (and the departmental structures that support those disciplines and the scholarship conducted) lead to coalition building or offer any prospects for change in higher education?

Proposal Two: Academics going public

⁶ Thanks to my friend Bill Arney for this image.

C. Wright Mills, writing mid-century⁷, warned of the deepening entanglement of military, business and political elites that were consolidating national power and undermining public deliberation and authority. Mills would probably agree that educational leaders, drawn disproportionately today from business and political careers, and accountable to business-oriented boards and legislatures, are now a part of that entangled governing “elite.” The current proposal to have a federal accreditation process, under the control of the Department of Education, is a dramatic example of the changes promoted by the coalition of economic, political and educational interests. The trajectory and momentum of this solidification of institutional power in the country must be met with the best of what academics can offer.

In response to the consolidation by elites, Mills urged the creation of communities of “publics.” He contrasted such communities with the “masses” who were people cut off from effective participation in governance becoming more and more dependent on the decisions of elites. Many academics experience the changes in higher education today in these terms – as higher education responds to external forces members of colleges feel a loss of agency and ability to exercise judgment.

For Mills, a public is created within the relationships people establish with one another and the authority that develops through their interactions.⁸ The “work” of a public is tied directly to the shared interests and the qualities of the relationships established among them. It is not sufficient that academics simply organize, he

⁷ Mills, C. Wright. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

⁸ “In a public, as we may understand the term, (1) virtually as many people express opinions as receive them. (2) Public communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public. Opinion formed by such discussion (3) readily finds an outlet in effective action, even against – if necessary – the prevailing system of authority. And (4) authoritative institutions do not penetrate the public, which is thus more or less autonomous in its operations. When these conditions prevail, we have the working model of a community of publics, and this model fits closely the several assumptions of classic democratic theory.” (Mills, 1959, p.)

would say, but that we do so in groups that nurture real agency and authority around our most crucial concerns. The groups must be based in collegial relations where members make their interests and values public and explicit, shape their collective work on the common ground they establish with one another, and where the ongoing work is done face-to-face or in some other direct medium.

Mills offers us a model of emergent educational authority. The first step involves building coalitions as members take the concerns and priorities of one another seriously, reach understanding and make decisions based on those views, and over time develop strategies for action. The second step involves academics participating in public and legislative forums where the critical decisions regarding education are made.

Interdisciplinary Studies: A Case Study of Competing Educational Principles

The current interest in “interdisciplinary studies” offers a good case study of the increasingly imbalanced and competing principles in higher education, and how those principles play out when trying to bring about change. Interdisciplinary studies promises to offer a significant change in what and how faculty members teach and how students learn. There are a number of options under the interdisciplinary umbrella – linked courses (where schedules are synchronized), separate classes jointly planned by two or more faculty members, student-directed fields of concentration, and full-time, team taught coordinated studies programs. While there is considerable variation among programs, two intentions stand out: they all strive to lessen the fragmentation of knowledge for faculty and students, and they promote to varying degrees more collaboration among faculty members.

Interdisciplinary studies: A strategy situated in disciplinary paradigms.

A number of interdisciplinary curriculum projects have emerged in the last years. These projects offer trainings and models of assessment for what they call “interdisciplinarity.” One such example is the Interdisciplinary Studies Project at Harvard. The Principal Investigator for the Project, Veronica Boix Mansilla, writes:

I define interdisciplinary inquiry as the pursuit of an advancement in understanding –i.e. an enhancement in our capacity to solve problems, produce explanations, create products, and raise questions—by means of bringing together bodies of knowledge and modes of thinking stemming from two or more disciplines. Three features are central to this definition...interdisciplinarity is *purposeful...disciplined...integrative*⁹

The members of the Project have done much to introduce “interdisciplinarity” to the broader higher education community. A critical foundation of their work is reflected in their efforts to create a rubric for assessing “interdisciplinarity.” The rubric rests on a key assumption: disciplinary mastery precedes and is essential for interdisciplinary understanding. For example, in a Protocol designed by another interdisciplinary assessment project¹⁰ teachers are asked the following questions: “Are the particular disciplinary insights/modes of thinking selected appropriate to inform the purpose of the work? To what extent is the student able to use disciplinary insights/modes of thinking or ability areas in accurate and/or effective ways?” Educators are encouraged to create

⁹ Boix Mansilla, Veronica. “Interdisciplinary Work at the Frontier: An Empirical Examination of Expert Epistemologies.” *Issues in Integrative Studies*. No. 24, 2006

¹⁰ National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities.

assessment rubrics grounded in a linear relationship from disciplinary to interdisciplinary learning.

The work of these projects illustrates a struggle between competing paradigms – one that remains situated in academic disciplines as we currently know them, and one, described below, attempting to create a new model of knowledge. As long as disciplines remain the standard for assessment, efforts towards greater “interdisciplinarity” will be constrained. The Director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Evergreen, a college based on interdisciplinary studies, summarized the problem in the following way:

The standards of evidence and the need and means to ‘prove’ effectiveness are still firmly locked in metrics that are often disciplinary, linear, categorical and/or hierarchical paradigms. Thus, even radical complex insights into interdisciplinary learning are subject to reductionist assessments which undermine the very complexity that has been realized.¹¹

It appears to me that the current efforts to assess interdisciplinary understanding may actually be functioning to conserve traditional educational principles: interdisciplinary study is only possible after mastery of disciplinary material, and assessment of interdisciplinary learning depends on traditional metrics and models. Promoting “interdisciplinarity” may inadvertently be solidifying the centrality of disciplines and all of the structural conditions that accompany them.

My interpretation is not a criticism of those educators attempting to advance what they assume to be an innovation but

¹¹ Laura Coghlan, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, The Evergreen State College. Personal correspondence. January 2008.

rather a reminder of the tenacity and intractability of institutionalized educational power and priorities. In his history of American education, Michael Katz argues that education has always remained in synch with and supportive of the larger economic and political elites, and the structures that support them¹². I find such projects to be good examples of the persistence and tenacity of dominant relations of power and its ability to promote an “illusion of educational change.” The effect leads to an expansion of the very problem being addressed. This is what Kuhn referred to as the process of “redoing science” where new knowledge conforms to traditional paradigms. This trend has disturbing consequences for academics.

It is hard to recognize and resist extension of dominant paradigms when they are presented as such compelling and attractive reforms. But that is exactly the work academics must do and that we can do so well. Rooting out the contradictions, a process key to clear-headed participation in current educational debates, is best done within a “public” where members first create understanding and the basis of their authority that then will guide their efforts in more formal decision making settings.

Interdisciplinary studies: A strategy of collegiality

A contrasting approach is being taken by collegially based groups of academics whose primary intent is to create Mills-like “publics” as a way to transcend the intellectual as well as organizational constraints of academic disciplines. These colleagues are consciously working outside of current disciplinary paradigms. They are attempting to shape their research and thinking in light of the change they seek. Below are three examples of this effort to articulate differences inherent to interdisciplinary study:

¹² Katz, Michael B. *Class, Bureaucracy and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America*. New York: Praeger, 1971.

Interdisciplinary work is not a peaceful operation: it begins *effectively* when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down...to the benefits of a new object and a new language, neither of which is in the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront.¹³

Interdisciplinary means, in its clearest formulation, a kind of inquiry that looks into the structure and internal logic of the various disciplines and seeks to transcend them in the interest of knowledge through inquiry that is believed to be superior to disciplinary-based inquiry. Those disciplinary-based inquiries are socially conditioned by the structure of educational institutions, departments and the professionalization of disciplines¹⁴.

Imagine models floating above each other in distinct dimensions: it is not their homologies that prove suggestive or fruitful, but rather the infinitesimal divergences, the imperceptible lack of fit between the levels – extrapolated out into a continuum whose stages range from the pre-choate and the quizzical gap, to the nagging tension and the sharpness of contradiction itself – genuine thinking always takes place within empty places, these voids that suddenly appear between the most powerful conceptual schemes. Thinking is thus not the concept, but the breakdown in the relationships between individual concepts, isolated in their splendour like so many galactic systems, drifting apart in the empty mind of the world.¹⁵

¹³ Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text" in *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

¹⁴ David Marr, Member of the Faculty, The Evergreen State College. Summer, 2007

¹⁵ Jameson, Frederic. Quoted in "Frederic Jameson" by William McPheron, *Stanford Presidential Lectures in the Humanities and Arts*. 1999 <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/jameson/>

These quotes speak to an approach to interdisciplinary studies actively resistant to traditional assumptions and where the thinker willingly risks the comfort of “knowledge” and all its supporting structures. Like Mills, I believe such new thinking – the “work” of academics – must be done in relationship with other academics. Two colleagues at my home institution described such relationships as “collegial”:

What is crucial to collegial teaching is that the two (or more) teachers join together out of a common intellectual interest. What brings the colleagues together must be a genuine interest, not an interest invented as a pretext for creating a course. And there must be some common ground in their intellectual interests so together they can formulate a question or project the joint pursuit of which will be genuinely interesting to each – though not necessarily for the same reasons.

There are consortia and institutes in the country attempting to pursue interdisciplinary studies and research in this way. The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, housed at the University of Virginia, describes itself as “an interdisciplinary research center and intellectual community.” They define their work in the following way:

Our attention...is directed ...to what we call the “deep structures” of contemporary culture, to the way transformation at this largely tacit and constitutive level take concrete institutional form in the organization of public life, in the moral coordinates of people’s personal lives, and in the sources of meaning that define human flourishing...inquiry into the deep structures of contemporary culture requires a rejection of the tendencies toward scientistic reductionism in the social sciences and a facile nihilism in the humanities in favor of an approach that transcends conventional disciplinary theories, methods

and practices....The work of the Institute is also based upon a commitment to dialogical pluralism, both within the Institute's community and as it engages intellectual life more generally."¹⁶

Another example of a collegially based approach to educational innovation, including interdisciplinary studies, is The Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL)¹⁷. This is a national project attempting to promote collegial relationships among its thirteen member colleges. One of the Consortium's primary audiences is its own members, and the faculty and students within those institutions. The work of the Consortium has centered on face-to-face interactions among both faculty and students on the member institutions' campuses. The time together is spent in common inquiry on key topics that have included interdisciplinary study, pedagogies for social justice, narrative evaluations and sustainability studies. Another primary audience for the Consortium is the larger higher education community. Consortium members hope to bring insights from their work together to help shape the debate and discussion within higher education.

One final example of a collegially based approach, in this case to liberal arts, is the annual "Conversation on the Liberal Arts" sponsored by Gaede Institute for the Liberal Arts at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. This institute is primarily focused on faith-based institutions; each year they invite scholars from both public and private colleges to enter into *conversation* about critical topics in education. As they make clear in their mission, their approach is to "stimulate dialogue between all streams in the liberal arts tradition."¹⁸

¹⁶ Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. "Vision Statement." Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia. 2007

¹⁷ <http://www.cielearn.org/>

¹⁸ <http://www.westmont.edu/institute/mission.html>

What lessons can be drawn from these approaches to interdisciplinary studies? The role of academics in the future of higher education must be intellectually substantive and strategic. There is no way academics can, or should, match or try to replicate the business and political forces that exercise such a potent force on higher education today. Academics have to become a public force based in what only academics can offer – inquisitiveness, intellectual rigor, and the skills to pursue meaningful and complex ideas. We must create lively intellectual communities whose “work” provides members’ insight into the nature of “knowledge,” its production, and the forces through which it is institutionalized. That understanding will be the formidable groundwork and source of authority that will help re-establish academics in the national debate and future decisions for higher education.