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Eyeless in Academe: An American View of Disciplinary Myopia

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Abstract:

The division of universities into academic departments has deleterious effects on the educational enterprise. Our external publics perceive universities to be in disarray, irrelevant to current problems and preoccupied with academic squabbling. Disciplinary elitism is dysfunctional, leading to academic bigotry and disrespect of honest intellectual striving. Yet many scholars see the increasing need for interdisciplinary programs, and some even see the departmental structure of universities melting away. “Real world” professionals see the need for the development of multi-disciplinary education increasing as the complexity of our “real world” problems grows. We need to educate our students so they will be able to manage the complex innovation challenges of the future.

Key words: educational innovation, interdisciplinary education, academic bigotry, elitism, international education, educational reform

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"To the man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail"
"Education is not filling the bucket but lighting a fire" - William Butler Yeats

Disciplinary Elitism: Nails for a coffin?

There's no doubt that the American educational enterprise is sailing in rough waters these days. Severe budget cuts, hostile political rhetoric (passionately described by Ellen Schrecker (2010)), vitriolic assaults on the teaching profession, student loan cuts and uncomfortable "value for money" questions should remind us all that important shapers of public opinion and holders of the purse strings are not necessarily friendly to either our ideas or values. Indeed, recent national polls in the U.S. suggest that the public at large has doubts about the value of a college education. (Adams, 2011).

Yes, we can argue all we want about shortsightedness, philistinism and the need to prepare our students for a future of an increasingly competitive international environment. After all, China and India are churning out ever greater numbers of college graduates, many in the sciences and engineering, as they climb the competitiveness ladder—and, we might remind some politicians and public figures, you won't find arguments about Darwin in the educational discourse of these emerging superpowers.

But let's not protest too much. It may be that some of our difficulties are self-inflicted. For starters, consider how some of our publics on the outside might see us: institutions in disarray.

Imagine for a moment that you are a patient in a hospital staffed by doctors all of whom are true believers in different treatment protocols. Some believe that all illnesses arise from heart problems; others believe that all ills are related to the kidneys; some swear our ailments should only be attributed to the lungs; others accuse the liver; and yet others target the spleen or the humors of the blood. Moreover, these specialists ridicule what others had to say. Add to the mix conflict between the surgeons, who want to cut everything out, and the internists, who want to leave everything in. At the end, assuming you survive, you'd best leave the place and get cured on your own.

This sounds like the premise for a hilarious comic opera by Rossini or a farce by Oscar Wilde: confusions of identity, parodies of earnestness. But unfortunately today's university may appear to outsiders to be very much like this hypothetical hospital. A large number of academics seem to truly believe that only their discipline—their hammer for chipping away at the world—has the key to human understanding or the answer to how the world works. This sort of academic myopia runs rampant through many institutions in direct contrast to our otherwise open-minded culture in which most forms of intolerance are, well, not tolerated. We are not denying the desirable and necessary need for intellectual competition; rather, we are concerned about the corrosive effects of academic dogma. No wonder that the university system is looked at askance by outsiders—and more seriously, that our students are dismissive, and drink the Kool-Aid that all one can get out of a university education is a credential.

And it's no wonder then that there are many studies critical of the contemporary university

from within the academic community. For instance, Derek Bok surveys the many attempts to reform U.S. universities in *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton UP 2006) and can only remain cautiously optimistic that *something* can be done. But Louis Menaud, in *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (Menaud 2010), makes the case that the 21st century university suffers from intellectual rigor mortis and that arguments over reform are like “Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, the lawsuit in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, or to being in psychoanalysis: interminable, repetitive and inclusive.” That these two distinguished education experts are so engaged is indicative of the disarray in the academic world.

Departments, Elitism and Intellectual Fragmentation

The departmental structure of the modern university, rooted in a supposed hierarchy of intellectual disciplines, has contributed greatly to this problem of disciplinary elitism. The loyalty of most academics is to their own department, discipline, and subdiscipline. Burton Clark (1983:30) noted: “... the discipline rather than the institution tends to become the dominant force in the working lives of academics.” Most departments work very hard to keep outsiders out. And should some credentialed (i.e., Ph.D. holder) academic venture off the intellectual reservation of his or her discipline, the censure for going AWOL and off-limits can be severe.

What is possibly most strange about this disciplinist way of thinking is that the large majority of these academic cubbyholes are less than 100 years old. The modern university was inspired by the German *Universitäten* of 19th century. The organization of colleges by departments is relatively new. The University of Virginia, which together with Harvard was among the first to organize by departments in the United States, opened in 1825 with seven departments called colleges. They were: ancient languages, modern languages, mathematics, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, chemistry, and medicine (Cowley and Williams, 1991). New York University had only two departments in 1831 (Storr, 1953: 37-41). Columbia University had 42 academic departments at the beginning of the 20th Century and started the 21st Century with more than 85 departments. Of course, knowledge has expanded. Still, it is obvious that the number of academic departments has been rapidly increasing (Cohen, 1998).

True, most universities insist on an array of general education requirements for students. These requirements are there to ensure that students recognize the importance of disparate disciplines in understanding the world and humanity. Accordingly, one would expect academics to respect the contributions of different disciplines in generating knowledge. Unfortunately, interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary research is not often respected, even though almost a growing number of academics will admit that knowledge has become increasingly interdisciplinary and the disciplines are converging.

The Interdisciplinary Impetus—and Consequences

Many scholars have noted the importance of interdisciplinary courses and programs. Perkins (1991) feels that academic subjects are “artificial partitions with historic roots of limited contemporary significance.” Kolodny (1998, pp. 40-41) feels that interdisciplinary programs are crucial for students educated in the twenty-first century, and that the antiquated way of organizing

colleges — by departments — will have to “evolve into collaborative and flexible units.” More recently, multidisciplinary “core courses” and the spread of “Big History” offerings only emphasize the impetus. (Rodrigue 2010)

Duderstadt (2000) suggests that the university of the future will be very different from today’s institution. One major change will be that the future university will be divisionless, i.e., there will be many more interdisciplinary programs. There will also be “a far more intimate relationship between basic academic disciplines and the professions.” Duderstadt (1997) asks us to consider “whether the concept of the disciplinary specialist is relevant to a future in which the most interesting and significant problems will require ‘big think’ rather than ‘small think.’”

We should grasp these trends if we see that our task is to educate responsible *citizens*, who will need to have a critical appreciation of the nexus of issues—scientific, economic, political, cultural—that will define the crucial issues of our time, among them:

- global warming--and its effects on food production as the Himalayan glaciers, headwaters of the great river systems of Asia, where 50% of the world population lives, disappear;
- nuclear proliferation--weapons for national defense or electricity for economic development and the growth of commerce?;
- digitization--the universal translation of all information—words, images, sounds—into zeros and ones and the potential for both the degradation and/or the democratizing spread of ideas around the globe.

Can We Avoid Disciplinary Myopia?

Back in 1960, in one of the most significant and influential articles written, Theodore Levitt at Harvard described a phenomenon he labeled as “marketing myopia” (Levitt, 1960). Organizations suffering from marketing myopia define their activities in terms of a product rather than a need or a benefit that customers seek. They are guilty of narrow and short-term thinking that can result in not only the early obsolescence of their service or product, but also of the organization itself. Levitt argued that the railroads, at the turn of the century, were guilty of marketing myopia. Railroad executives felt that they were in the business of transporting people and goods by rail and ignored other nascent modes of transportation such as air and truck. They may have thought their business was the romance of the rails, but their business was really transportation. Similarly, he warned the oil industry that its real business is energy, not oil.

Academics who define themselves solely in terms of a discipline or, worse yet, a subdiscipline, are also myopic. Academics are in the knowledge “business.” Our job is to not only filling the bucket with basic information and academic formulas, but also lighting the students’ fire so that they can think and learn for themselves. It’s not to publish unread books or articles in journals the prestige of which is in inverse relationship to the number of readers. But, of course, try telling that to tenure committees.

In sum, our goal is to provide students with the tools and desire for lifelong learning. After all, if they don’t keep learning they’ll quickly become obsolete. There should be a critical respect for knowledge; it is myopic to believe that only one’s own subdiscipline is of unique overarching value. Indeed, a student who feels that only one discipline has all the answers is not going to do well in the

real world where cognitive flexibility and full engagement of the range of human intelligences are necessary.

Academic Bigotry and its Consequences

So what are some of the insidious effects of academic elitism? For one thing, it legitimizes disrespect—it allows faculty members in one discipline to have no respect for those of another discipline and to look down on attempts to develop multidisciplinary understandings. It also devalues professional education, which is sometimes confused with “vocational” training akin to high school typing classes (themselves obsolete in an age where keyboard skills are rapidly acquired in the sub-teen flush of excitement in getting your very own Facebook or Twitter account).

Indeed, it may seem ironic that professionals actively engaged in the “real world” may be more appreciative of multi-disciplinary education than cloistered academics. Surveys one of us has conducted with multinational business executives in the U.S., Asia and Europe have highlighted the necessity of foreign language skills as well as cultural knowledge and sensitivity, not just for success but also for survival while working away from the home office. The old joke goes that a bilingual is a person who speaks two languages; a monolingual is an American. But language is not enough—for example, according to international executives surveyed in Japan, both Japanese and foreign, grasping basic understanding of Japanese culture and social practices are “essential”; knowledge of Japanese history and “the sociology of Japanese business” were “important” and “useful”. Studies done in China and Europe came up with similar results. (Frankenstein 1988, 1993).

Further, academic disrespect often results in the sort of supersized feuds we have come to expect in academe, for example: finance vs. economics; sociology vs. economics; liberal arts vs. business; psychology vs. sociology; engineering vs. physics. Consistent with the “us vs. them” battles in other arenas, the “us” may become narrower and more specific and the “them” larger, and so with time, the battles spread to subdisciplines: applied mathematicians vs. theoretical mathematicians; applied philosophers vs. theoretical philosophers; computer scientists vs. MIS faculty; econometricians vs. experimental “behavioral” economists; “area studies” vs. international relations, structuralists vs. post-modernists, “hard” quants vs. “soft” deep descriptionists, Friedmanites vs. Keynesians. In the discipline of economics, there are even those who refer to themselves as post-autistic economists, meaning that their research is newer, more open minded and less self-absorbed than more conventional economics. Labels, of course, are one sure way to draw intellectual lines that ensure independence—or, more likely, isolation.

Within departments, there can be a multiplicity of factions, each arguing that only its group has the tools to understand the discipline: These disagreements lead to battles over the kind of faculty members that should be hired and who should get tenure. Doctoral students writing dissertations have to be careful in selecting their committee members. Some disciplinist faculty members have been known to appear at a student's defense for the express purpose of trashing the dissertation research of a student whose only sin was to ask a faculty member from another faction to serve on his or her committee. Such a student is collateral damage, caught in the crossfire of academic bigotry.

Junior faculty, especially, have to be careful where they publish. A professor in one discipline who publishes in A+ journals of another discipline may not get tenure since she is deemed to be publishing “out of area.” It is a better career move to publish tripe in an “acceptable” journal rather than make a real contribution but in another discipline’s literature. Is it any wonder that many scholars feel that the vast majority of all journal articles have little or no real value?

Additionally, disciplinary elitism has a further adverse effect on knowledge. Edwards (1999) asserts that “in so many cases, the most provocative and interesting work is done at the intersections where disciplines meet, or by collaborators blending several seemingly disparate disciplines to attack real problems afresh.” Disciplinists who want their departments to be “pure” and not consist of those with expertise in other disciplines may actually harm the quality of the research done by their departments. Disciplinists also hurt research by not encouraging collaborations among different areas; in fact, they tend to discourage it. Each discipline uses its own models and jargon to make sure that they have complete and exclusionary control over their own narrow agenda.

Getting It Together

We think we can all agree that no one discipline has a monopoly on understanding how the world works. Just as there is no *Übermensch*, there is no *Überdiscipline*. The same can be said of disciplinary models; all models have something to contribute and no one model is the perfect representation of reality (Friedman, Friedman, and Pollack, 2008). It is becoming increasingly clear that knowledge crosses disciplines. Great strides in research can only be made when individuals from several fields get together to solve a problem. The greatest accomplishments of humankind have been the results of individuals from many disciplines working together. Space travel, for example, would not be possible without the achievements of researchers in areas of physics, engineering, chemistry, computer science, materials science, operations research, and management. The combination of historical linguistics with advanced mathematics has offered fascinating insights to the origins and development of language. And let us not forget the stunning progress that has been made in genetics. Indeed, if the future depends on managing innovation—technological, social, economic, political—then a broad vision, an ability to see the big picture of how the disparate parts of the world connect, is essential.

In a world culture that values diversity, no academic would propose that only white men (mostly dead) have made a significant contribution to the vast and ever-expanding body of knowledge. Similarly, we ought not tolerate the closed disciplinist who disrespects other academic disciplines. At the same time we should welcome open intellectual competitiveness and collaboration. These are the steps we need to take to get our house in order—for ourselves and for our external publics.

Our “industry” is knowledge. How do we instill in our students a thirst for lifelong learning? We teach them to respect all knowledge. We teach them, as well, to appreciate the diversity of our various disciplines, and how each in its own way contributes an essential element towards our understanding of the world in which we live. Otherwise, whatever fire we may have lit will be pale

fire indeed. And otherwise, should we fall into self-absorbed disarray, a failure to achieve effective solidarity and demonstrations of relevance will further weaken our efforts to hold off present and future dangers. Divided houses, remember, cannot stand.

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