We'll discuss Chapter 5 from the Lazerson book. However, we've included some other chapters for you to peruse at your option if you'd like to get a better feel for his argument.

You'll also find a copy of the Introduction to Inside the Undergraduate Experience, the in depth longitudinal study of UW Seattle undergrads conducted by Beyer, Gillmore and Fisher. That study makes interesting reading both because it represents one model for a study we could pursue here, and also because it contrasts so thoroughly with Lazerson's argument that the emergence of powerful academic disciplines has pre-empted good conversations about undergraduate learning.

Suggested Reading:

*Chapter 5  American Disciplines, Research Imperatives and Undergraduate Learning*

Others:

*Chapter 1  Inside the Undergraduate Experience*

*Chapter 6  Revolution in Teaching and Learning*

*Chapter 7 What is higher education is so hard to reform?*
Higher Education and the American Dream
Success and its Discontents

Marvin Lazerson

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CHAPTER 5
Academic disciplines, research imperatives, and undergraduate learning

I would really like to teach one of the new interdisciplinary courses in the general education program, but my colleagues in my department would accuse me of betraying my academic discipline.

(Summary of numerous conversations with faculty colleagues)

For America's professors, the great triumph of the post-World War II era lay in the dominance of the academic disciplines. The disciplines gave faculty intellectual authority as they searched for new knowledge, trained graduate students, and shaped the undergraduate curriculum. Organizationally, the disciplines were centered in academic departments, which overwhelmingly controlled their own hiring, promotion, and the awarding of tenure, as well as becoming the most influential entities in the governance of individual colleges and universities. If all of this was insufficient, the academic disciplines lay at the heart of the research enterprise.

5.1 Purposes and tensions

After World War II, debates about the purposes of higher education came to the fore, with three themes receiving primary attention. The first came out of the immediate success of theoretical and applied research, as scientists who had been active during the war made an effective case for continuing federal investments in research on university campuses. Ultimately they were successful in creating the National Science Foundation and receiving substantially increased foundation support for graduate education and advanced research, preparing the next generation of scholars to expand the boundaries of knowledge. Indeed, it is safe to say, that university-based research took on an importance in almost every sphere of American life—what Roger Geiger calls, "research and relevant knowledge"—that had been barely imaginable before 1940 (Geiger, 1993, 1986; Graham, 2005).
The amount of money that became available for research was mind-boggling and with the dollars came a dramatic shift in the distribution of power as a corrupt bargain—my label—emerged. Individual professors able to gain substantial amounts of research funds achieved independent status within the university. The American system of distributing research money was usually based upon a peer review process evaluating the worth of the research proposal. While the money was channeled through a particular university, in practice, it was being awarded to the primary researchers, with the university serving as little more than distributing agency, essentially delivering the checks to the researchers. In return for this, the university received two things it desperately wanted—money and prestige—each of which carried considerable importance. Money paid professors’ and staff salaries, allowed for graduate student fellowships, and bought equipment, but it also often came in the form of “overhead”—central administrative support, university libraries, heating and electrical costs—often amounting to an additional 50% of original grant. Money bought prestige and in turn, prestige made it easier to attract still more money. For the funded researcher, the university’s gains were a godsend, leading the universities to treat research professors as treasures, who could, if they so chose, sell themselves to competitors. The power of money and prestige was simply too much for university officials, who usually chose not to look too closely at such annoyances as how the money was actually being spent, the actual conduct of the research, ethical questions involved in the research, the treatment of graduate students, the quality of teaching, or even whether the research professor was regularly on the university campus. Research funding created a free agency world, like the free agency of professional athletes, in which individual professors had enormous negotiating power—over salaries, working conditions, extra travel and summer funds—creating a two-tier faculty system, akin to George Orwell’s Animal Farm, in which all professors are equal, but some are more equal than others.1

1 Derek Bok (2003) makes a version of this argument with regard to intercollegiate athletics and expresses worry that the same thing is happening with regard to contract research. My view is that the research enterprise has already achieved the power that now resides in intercollegiate athletic programs.
5.2 The neglect of learning

The purposes of higher education that emerged after World War II—research, vocationalism, and civic education—were neither new nor were they easily compatible. Seeking to achieve them created innumerable tensions. Yet each of the purposes expanded, although in different ways. General education found a home on probably half of America’s colleges in the 1950s (Sloan, 1980), and continued to be a feature of higher educational institutions around the country, regularly debated and resurfacing in various forms. Research and vocationalism became the essential features of American higher education. As different as the two goals seemed, they had something in common, for each pointed higher education toward a greatly expanded curriculum to accommodate the desires of the faculty and the goals of the students. Debates about purposes inevitably drove faculty into questions of curriculum. What is the curricular content of an education for citizenship? What should be the relationship between the liberal arts and vocational or professional preparation? How should research and graduate education connect to the undergraduate curriculum? What should be the balance between required courses and electives? What defines a major?

Often faculty questions about purposes became questions about curricular modifications and departmental power rather than about knowledge and learning. For instance, what courses should students take? When should they take them? How many courses can students choose and from what menu? What should students read? Do interdisciplinary courses water-down the curriculum? Ironically, what was supposed to be an effort to connect the purposes of higher education to what students should learn, understand, and make meaningful, converted into decisions about what each department would require of its students, into negotiations over how much each department had to “service” (a commonly used phrase) general education courses, and into a fixation by individual faculty members on the courses they had to teach and their course reading lists (Cuban, 1999).

During these debates, little attention was paid to learning itself, how students learned, what kinds of knowledge they acquired and how long they retained it, how applicable the knowledge was for students’ lives, or whether the methods of teaching and of assessing student learning were the best ones available. Curriculum was of central importance to professors since most spent their time teaching and put substantial efforts into reading lists and testing students’ course knowledge. Yet learning itself and the appropriate pedagogy were rarely addressed, beyond students fulfilling course requirements and professors preparing lectures and seminar notes. The few studies undertaken to assess the impact of teaching on student learning had little effect on how professors went about their business.

Not until the widely publicized decline in SAT scores in the late 1970s did the question of learning begin to occupy a noticeable place in higher education, and even then the initial reaction was to blame forces external to postsecondary education—low academic standards in elementary and high school, too much time watching television or, what came later, playing computer games, even the breakdown of the family—or to complain that open and low college admission requirements had reduced student incentives to learn. Academia itself did not take seriously questions about the relationship between what was taught and how it was taught on the one hand, and student learning on the other. Only with the challenges to higher education in the late 1980s over the price-returns squeeze—soaring tuition increases and growing costs—did student learning become a serious agenda item, especially as public and political criticisms of the amount and quality of teaching mounted.

The faculty’s concerns with learning and teaching have inevitably been translated into questions about what to teach and when to teach it, questions which were primarily answered within the academic departments and in terms of each academic discipline. What constituted the discipline’s most important scholarly questions? What were the discipline’s most appropriate methodologies? What were the cutting edge specializations within the discipline and could the faculty teach them? These were useful and relevant questions, but they were not about issues of student learning.

It is not hard to explain the relative absence of discourse within higher education over student learning or of any sustained discourse on the effectiveness of courses or about how well students comprehended what they had been taught (Association of American Col-
leges, 1985; Wagener, 1989). Little incentive existed for faculty and administrators or, for that matter, parents and students to worry about what students learned. As long as the system grew in numbers and wealth and everyone presumed that professional success and income returns were tied to college graduation, the breadth, depth, and content of classroom learning took a distant second place. And with faculty focused on their own disciplines—on their capacity to understand and teach the primary questions of their discipline—they saw little need to ask questions about the relationship of student learning to citizenship or vocational responsibilities.

There was a second reason why student learning was so little addressed. Classroom teaching became associated with academic freedom. What professors did inside the classroom had to be defended against external threats—from McCarthyism, conservatives and religious fundamentalists, leftist radicals, politicians, administrators, and ultimately from the students themselves. The defense of academic freedom had the effect of making the classroom a “private” domain—as the widespread faculty disregard of student evaluations often made clear. Any questions about what happened in the classroom, even whether students were learning anything, were viewed as threats to the faculty member’s liberty. The transactions of the classroom, teaching and learning, needed to be excluded from serious observation and evaluation.

Instead of concentrating on learning, American higher education focused on organizing academic content and delivering it. Colleges experiment with technology and new approaches to teaching even less than elementary and secondary schools do. Sad to say, the recent versions of this, like the use of power point presentations, comes across as pathetic, usually little more than lectures with the lights dimmed so that the students can read the slides and enjoy the occasional animated features. Lectures and seminars dominate the presentation of knowledge, with the former often directed at large numbers of students. After the 1960s greater informality between faculty and students occurred with professors and students similarly dressed and referring to each other by first names. Informality may have enhanced collegial feelings between professors and students, but it led neither to students learning more nor to any substantial change in the delivery of information to students.

The lack of interest in pedagogical experiments reflected the dominance of substantive academic content over instructional values. The ascendant model of academic knowledge derived from the research universities. It was regularly contested, as evidenced by the various efforts to introduce specially constructed general education courses or to involve students in hands-on clinical or practical experiences or most recently in community-based service learning. Yet the dominant notion of higher education’s knowledge base has remained: students should learn what the professors know and the most important kind of knowledge professors know is conditioned by the research community and its disciplines. Whether through departmental structures, the organization of course catalogues, reading lists, or the requirements for majors, the patterns set by the research universities have become standard for most of higher education, especially as research universities became the source of the overwhelming number of professors in higher education. Alternatives continued to exist, but they were precisely that, alternatives to the dominant pattern of belief and practice.

This argument, of course, risks generalizing developments at the research universities into what is characteristic for all of higher education, reducing the distinctions between liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, and community colleges to mere caveats. That is not my intention. Sectors of higher education and individual campuses differ, often in substantial ways. Nonetheless, I am persuaded that in the organization of knowledge and its relationship to student learning, the research universities have come to dominate the discourse and remain the most influential model. To quote Richard Freeland (1992, p.118), “The central tenet of this model was that the university whose faculty was most productive in research, as measured by publications in important scholarly outlets and... by success in attracting outside funding, was the best university. The model incorporated a clear hierarchy of values: it celebrated modern, scientifically oriented research above traditional forms of interpretive or synthetic scholarship; investigation of basic problems above applied work and therefore the arts and sciences above professional fields; research over teaching; and graduate-level training above undergraduate education. It also retained more traditional indicators of academic prestige: selective admission policies,
residential facilities, and strength in the liberal arts and the elite professions... by becoming research universities, leading institutions altered the terms in which other campuses, occupying positions of lesser prestige, understood the requirements of upward academic mobility." Freeland's summary statement written in the early 1990s needs revision; contract and therefore applied research, professional education, and fundraising as distinct from research grants have all assumed substantially greater influence throughout higher education. The main thrust of Freeland's analysis nonetheless remains accurate.

Higher education's curriculum underwent broad, substantial change after 1970. Its size exploded and it became chaotic. Even small colleges produced course catalogues that made any notion of a focused curriculum anachronistic. Large schools had city telephonebook-sized course catalogues; as early as 1975 Cornell University needed 700 pages to present its undergraduate course offerings (Rudolph, 1977, p. 1). It was not anarchy, since some requirements continued at almost every institution, but the orderly progression of courses from freshman- to senior-level that had previously constrained choices and demanded that majors in a discipline go through a set of hierarchically ordered courses, from introductory surveys to more specialized advanced seminars, gave way. By the 1980s the range of what a student could choose to satisfy degree requirements, the very quantity of courses offered, and the difficulties in distinguishing between elementary and advanced courses were frequently overwhelming. And, as increasing numbers of students began taking courses at more than one institution or began adding internet courses to the dossier, the idea of an even partially coherent curriculum simply disappeared.

At the same time higher education accepted and even exaggerated the growth of the parallel curriculum in which student life flourished. Building upon a tradition of student interests separate from the academic interests of the faculty, colleges and universities increased the number and intensity of student services, built student centers, expanded residential facilities, provided health care and career counseling, supported an increasing number of clubs, and in many cases, created a mega-sized intercollegiate athletic juggernaut that frequently defined the image of what a university was about. Much of the justification for student life once asserted itself through the view that such activities aid students in learning the teamwork, cooperation, leadership, and responsibility that will make them more effective professionals and citizens, implying that academic learning contributes a modest amount, at best, to these goals. Its value has also gotten a huge boost from the recognition that many students need academic, social, and psychological supports that either cannot or should not be met by professors. As competition for students grew and as the student life itself became fragmented into highly specialized clubs and activities, student services became a place where almost anything was justifiable. So powerful had the extra-curriculum become that by the last decades of the 20th century, it was routinely being referred to as the co-curriculum, an extraordinary recognition of its role. Although efforts have emerged to bring the co-curriculum into closer connection with the academic curriculum—e.g., through living and learning experiments—the co-curriculum remains a parallel and separate domain, by and large predicated on the absence of faculty to the mutual satisfaction of students and professors.

These developments were tied both to the triumph of the faculty as the principals in higher education and to the power of students to achieve their demands. For the faculty, the dramatic explosion in courses opened the way for professors to teach their specializations, to make what students should study congruent with what the faculty wanted to teach, which was their academic disciplines and their methodologies. The students gained expansive choice in what courses they took and a robust student life in which they could engage. While Americans committed themselves to the extraordinary growth of higher education for all sorts of reasons—national defense and economic development, an educated citizenry, local and regional pride, personal income and vocational gain, the expansion of educational opportunity—the professorate made the academic disciplines the organizational center and intellectual heart of universities and colleges. The students, with active institutional support, created a parallel and largely independent world.
5.3 The separation of science and morality

The triumph of separate tracks, with professors as master of their domain, while students had wide choices within the curriculum and were free to pursue student life free of academic oversight, was not de novo. It did not just happen after 1945. It had been evolving since the late 19th century, as the disciplines made scientific research and the methodology of science their raison d'être, creating a world that was by and large separate from that of students.  

For most of the 19th century, American higher education assumed that the unity of truth combined science and religion in the service of one another and that religion was the basis of morality. Higher education's purpose was to reinforce this unity, training simultaneously the intellect and moral character. The curriculum exemplified this, making the connection explicit in a culminating course in moral philosophy, in which students explored the literature of philosophy and theology to confirm their obligations to family, community, nation, and God and to reconcile religion and secular studies. As universities and colleges became connected to national and regional interests and to economic development—marked at the federal level by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which explicitly articulated the utilitarian aims of higher education—criticism of the curriculum's neglect of modern and practical subjects mounted, as did the failure to offer advanced instruction and the limitations that theology placed on scientific research. Colleges developed a much broader set of purposes than the traditional one of preparing for the learned professions and public life. New private universities—like Johns Hopkins, Cornell, and Chicago—and older ones—Harvard, Columbia, and Pennsylvania—as well as state universities like Wisconsin, Michigan, and California at Berkeley capitalized on the intensified interest in utilitarian and vocational outcomes, advanced research, and science to become the dominant players in higher education, even as the liberal arts colleges both adjusted to the new climate and justified their more traditional ethical and community responsibilities (Geiger, 1986, 1995; Leslie, 1992).

Initial strategies to reform the curriculum and to advance research tried to reaffirm the traditional connection between religion and science and thus between higher education and morality. The generation of “great university presidents”—Charles William Eliot (Harvard), Daniel Coit Gilman (Johns Hopkins), Andrew White (Cornell), William Rainey Harper (Chicago), and Nicholas Murray Butler (Columbia)—assumed that scientific research would continue to support religion. They hoped to show this by making religion a focus of scientific study. They failed.  

By the first decades of the 20th century, efforts to put universities at the service of the moral goals of the classical college while advancing knowledge were in retreat, “the ideal of the unity of truth did not seem plausible to younger intellectuals trained in the new universities” (Reuben, 1996, pp. 3-4). Over the next decades academics came to embrace the separation of facts and values. Facts were what natural and social scientists discovered. Teaching values and having them implemented behaviorally was neither the responsibility of scholars nor the goals of classroom instruction. While liberal arts colleges continued to hold to the validity of morally-based instruction and responsibilities, a new generation of university faculty severed the connection between their search for knowledge and moral behavior, between their roles as professors and the institution's responsibility for student values and behavior. It was not simply the making of the modern university; it was a revolution that worked a fundamental change in American higher education.

By the 1930s, the dominant view of knowledge centered around research in the academic disciplines, structurally organized within academic departments. The advancement of knowledge occurred most effectively and successfully when it was specialized, experimental (controlled as much as possible), quantitative, had replicable methodologies, and sharply distinguished between “pure” and “applied" research (with the former accorded higher status than the latter). Most powerfully, knowledge was best acquired and was most

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2 The section that follows depends heavily on Reuben (1996), which shows how colleges and universities redefined their traditional responsibilities for the moral and character building of students to accommodate the new expectation that the faculty's primary role was to become research scholars. Reuben also argues, as I do, that the growth of the extra-curriculum was directly connected to changes in the organization of knowledge and the emphasis on research.
trustworthy when scholars removed ethical concerns from their research, achieving ethical neutrality or ethical detachment. Only then could scientific credibility be achieved; only then could research achieve stature and social influence.

There were degrees and differences with which these views took hold. They were held and implemented most insistently in the natural sciences, which took seriously the need to separate research from religion and morality. But the new ideology came to dominate the social sciences also. Sociology, for example, saw the rise of a new scientism, in which facts had to be measured. The direct application to and involvement in social reform by social scientists was rejected, a phenomenon that at the University of Chicago pitted women faculty in a losing battle with their male counterparts for control over the social science disciplines (Bannister, 1987; Fitzpatrick, 1990). The humanities initially proved highly resistant to the separation of morality and science. The New Humanists critiqued the methodologies of science and its assumptions of progressive modernity. Potentially overwhelmed by the success of their social science and natural science colleagues, faculty in the humanities challenged the value and validity of morally neutral research and teaching. Among college and university administrators, few, if any, were willing to dispense with the view that an undergraduate’s character and morality were an institutional responsibility. In the liberal arts colleges, the separation of fact and value, of science and morality, was especially contested (Leslie, 1992).

By World War II universities had made a substantial shift to viewing science as a value-free enterprise engaged in by ethically neutral researchers. If teaching needed to acknowledge moral and normative values, if the institution had to provide for the character-building of undergraduates, so be it. Outside of courses that examined, scientifically, such issues, these were not the faculty’s problem, since they were best taken up outside the realm of scholarship, except insofar as moral issues were themselves a subject of scientific research. In opposition, many liberal arts colleges and those in universities that wanted their undergraduate program to be more traditional sought to overcome the disjuncture between the faculty as scholars and the moral responsibilities of teaching by urging required courses in the humanities and social sciences, as in Columbia’s required Contem-

porary Civilization courses, in order to promote citizenship education. Administrators, unwilling to challenge directly the faculty’s freedom to specialize and to engage in research, stressed the importance of teaching and faculty advising, as well as the faculty members’ moral character—the professor as personal model. They stressed the importance of the humanities in keeping open the dialogue between scholarship and morality (not incidentally, making the English department the academic home of such concerns). And, wherever they could, universities and colleges expanded on-campus housing and gained institutional oversight of the extra-curriculum. Ultimately, however, higher education settled upon a dual track educational program.

One track involved the formal organization of knowledge—the curriculum—controlled and delivered by an increasingly powerful faculty. The second track—the extra-curriculum—was the students’ domain loosely coordinated by student life professionals. While college and university administrators regularly stressed the complementary and overlapping nature of the curriculum and the extra-curriculum, leading the latter to be renamed the co-curriculum, the stress was more rhetorical than real. On university campuses the two curricula existed as independent and non-collaborative enterprises. In the liberal arts colleges, professors were asked to and often did breach the divide, although the trend was always toward separation. After World War II, the divide would achieve its apotheosis.

5.4 Triumph of methodology

The enlargement of faculty authority within the research and teaching domains was of extraordinary importance in the history of American higher education. Its story after World War II tends to be told as if this was a natural extension of the knowledge explosion and the potential contribution of knowledge to the national interest, stimulated by federal investment and institutional competition for prestige and dollars. But it is also useful to think of what happened in terms of the triumph of disciplinary methodology. Teaching a discipline to undergraduates meant training them in the methodologies relevant to that discipline. What this meant varied by each dis-

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discipline, but in every field the pressure was toward a model of greater scientific methodological precision, a trend that had the effect of inhibiting the conversation between disciplinary scholars and their undergraduate students, who were interested in many things, with methodology not being one of them.

The evolution of research methodology as the driver of teaching and learning had been underway for some time, but the dramatic acceleration of efforts to achieve methodological precision after World War II was not entirely predictable. The early postwar years after all witnessed a tremendous outpouring of rhetoric about higher education and democracy, the importance of general education for an informed citizenry, equality of opportunity, and the utilitarian and practical purposes of postsecondary schooling—a sufficiently broad set of aims which could have tolerated substantial diversity in the organization of knowledge. In retrospect, however, there was an eerie duality about the aspirations of the academy and the rhetoric of democracy. On the one hand, democratic and utilitarian purposes gave enormous boost to higher education's postwar growth. The combination of knowledgeable and productive citizens and the application of science to economic growth and national defense was irresistible. It was precisely this engagement with the outside world, the successes that were palpable, which brought millions of students and dollars into the industry. On the other hand, the faculty sought to sharpen the academic disciplines' foci and to create methodological forms that separated their work from the citizens they were educating. The faculty, which in fundamental ways depended upon the postwar expansion of enrollments—a sufficiently broad set of aims which could have tolerated substantial diversity in the organization of knowledge. In retrospect, however, there was an eerie duality about the aspirations of the academy and the rhetoric of democracy. On the one hand, democratic and utilitarian purposes gave enormous boost to higher education's postwar growth. The combination of knowledgeable and productive citizens and the application of science to economic growth and national defense was irresistible. It was precisely this engagement with the outside world, the successes that were palpable, which brought millions of students and dollars into the industry. On the other hand, the faculty sought to sharpen the academic disciplines' foci and to create methodological forms that separated their work from the citizens they were educating. The faculty, which in fundamental ways depended upon the postwar expansion of enrollments, was disinclined to make much accommodation to the calls for civic-minded education and the reality of greater student diversity. Even as the enterprise of higher education expanded, and even as higher education claimed utilitarian responsibilities—justifying investments in it and expanding enrollments—the knowledge that was being taught within the academic disciplines became narrower and narrower, more and more based on methodologies, and more and more disconnected from the everyday world of the students (Bender, 1997).

The way of the faculty had considerable merit. Given the organization of knowledge into academic departments based on the disciplines and the incentives to contribute to new knowledge, scholars were wise to construct technically grounded methodologies, with which they earned a distinctive status among their colleagues. The bind professors faced would have been difficult to resolve in the best of circumstances, for they were asked to speak to communities outside the academy as part of their civic and utilitarian responsibilities, yet simultaneously were expected to create a distinctive community of discipline-based colleagues whose language gave them exclusionary status. Mostly, they opted for the latter. In the historian Thomas Bender's words: "In retrospect it appears that the disciplines were redefined over the course of the half-century following the war: from the means to an end [civic responsibilities] they increasingly became an end in themselves, the possession of the scholars who constituted them. To a greater or lesser degree, academics sought some distance from civics. The increasingly professionalized disciplines were embarrassed by moralism and sentiment; they were openly or implicitly drawn to the model of science as a vision of professional maturity. The proper work of academics became disciplinary development and the training of students for the discipline" (Bender, 1997, p. 6).

Put differently, when faculty in the 1940s debated the curriculum and its relationship to society, they were engaged in discussions about an educated citizenry and the best forms of knowledge to connect their students to their post-college lives. This was the essence of the debates over general education and vocationalism. By the early and mid-1960s, curriculum discussions among the faculty—even with growing controversies about "relevance"—were much more likely to be about how to provide a structured introduction to each academic discipline. Undergraduate education was less about faculty concern for knowledgeable citizens and more about the specializations of each faculty member or department.

The extraordinary growth of higher education produced an enormously expansive industry built upon a shaky foundation, shaky because the foundation was held together by two critical conditions. The first assumed that economic returns to students would grow, opportunity costs would continue to go down, and students (and their parents) would always feel satisfied that each year of college was an excellent investment. As long as these occurred, the actual classroom enterprise made only modest difference. What
happened when professors and students met in the classroom was not all that consequential as long as there was substantial profit in acquiring the degree. The second condition was related to the first: higher education depended upon the success of the extra- or co-curriculum to provide students with the learning students considered most relevant to their success—social skills, leadership, networking, knowledge of the world around them, community and civic participation. As long as the co-curriculum was well supported and thriving, classroom learning was just not that important. When questions got raised in the 1980s and 1990s about high expenditures and high tuition costs and about how much students were really learning—essentially questions about value-added—controversy over faculty responsibilities immediately flared into the open. Professors were unclear and confused about why they and the institutions of higher education were being singled out, when they after all had built such a powerful industry.

5.5 Economics: queen of the sciences

At least part of the discontent with higher education involves the ways the academic disciplines evolved by divorcing themselves from the experiences and concerns of undergraduate students. Two disciplines—economics and philosophy—serve as examples.

No social science or humanities discipline achieved higher acclaim and stature than economics after World War II. Once referred to as the dismal science, economics quickly became a beacon of American higher education, simultaneously able to assert itself as a science and to claim utilitarian value. During the first decades after the war, economics laid plausible claim “to the belief that economists had learned how to manage (if not plan) an economy; that the business cycle was largely obsolete... that full employment was a possibility; economic growth could be maintained; and that the ‘Keynesian revolution’ had given economists the theoretical and practical tools to achieve all these goals” (Bell, 1982, p. 30). Economics’ great transformation lay in the application of mathematical model building and statistical analysis to a broad range of economic problems. In David Kreps’ words, “mathematical modeling, a small piece of the subject until the 1940s and 1950s, became the all-encompassing (some would say suffocating) language of the discipline” (Kreps, 1997, p. 62). Economists were able to parlay their claims of utilitarian value with methodological rigor to become the queen of the sciences.

The ability and desire of academic economists to transform economic knowledge into an analytic toolbox and harness the power of mathematical model-building was truly revolutionary, for it substantially broadened economists’ ability to make their discipline a science and to understand and to resolve complex economic and social problems. Model-building transformed the ways we understand all sorts of activities and behaviors. But it also subordinated economic history, ethics and normative judgments, and the direct observation of the real and messy world to theoretical mathematical models. For undergraduate education, these developments meant that the study of economics was, on the one hand, attractive because of its potential utility, and on the other, focused on exposure to analytic tools and model-building, which in many cases was more about technical skills than substantive economic issues. Economics for undergraduates became a version of the requirements of first year graduate students. The undergraduate’s responsibility was preparing to do economics, learning the analytic toolbox rather than studying and understanding economic problems directly (Solow, 1997; Bell, 1982, pp. 23–30, 46–52).

The discipline of economics thus successfully defined itself in the postwar period as a field of study under little obligation to engage in conversations with undergraduate students about economic institutions or about the economic issues that concerned students. The economic literacy necessary for an educated citizenry was not the responsibility of the academic discipline of economics. Undergraduates were required less to study such topics as international trade, labor markets, the historical development of economic conditions, or the relationship between politics and economics than they were to understand the language of mathematical modeling and the use of statistical techniques.

These conditions were not uniform. The day-to-day teaching in college and university classrooms, the need to mount a full range of courses to satisfy teaching responsibilities and, not so coincidentally, to justify the appointment of more economics professors,
the academic limitations of students meant that the exposure to the methodological toolbox was not the only agenda. Economists at liberal arts colleges occasionally found themselves at odds with the emphasis on pre-graduate training within the undergraduate curriculum, since the teaching tradition at their colleges required a more comprehensive approach (Barber, 1997). Nonetheless, the heart of the discipline, the path by which economics gained promotion and prestige, lay in an approach which was resistant and even hostile to what undergraduates expected economics would be about. Little wonder then that when given the opportunity, undergraduates flocked to economics-like courses in other disciplines and interdisciplinary programs, in business schools, and in other professional schools. Indeed, it is plausible to argue that for undergraduates the most interesting economics was being taught outside economics departments.

There are a number of caveats with which one could counter my argument about the absence of conversation between the discipline of economics and undergraduates. One, commonly proffered by economists, focuses on the students and other faculty rather than on the discipline's development; the decline in academic skills among undergraduates and their disinclination to take academic work seriously after the 1960s made it difficult for students to learn the necessary tools to study economics. Often implicit in this view is that there was a decline in standards among the other academic disciplines and that the growth of economics courses for non-economists in professional schools and in other departments further lessened the enthusiasm of undergraduates for serious learning. These arguments may have some measure of truth, but they are partial at best and tend to deny that economists themselves played a role in the process.

A second caveat suggests that my description of an absence of conversation is romantic in its implied view that there ever was a conversation between economists and undergraduates prior to the dominance of mathematical modeling, and that it neglects the substantial widening of the field of economics since the 1970s. The former is probably correct and I do not mean to portray an idealized notion of economics professors in conversation with their students before the 1950s. We know enough about the evolution of the disciplines and student cultures historically to disavow a golden age of universally curious and academically committed undergraduate learners (Horowitz, 1987). But I do think that the idea of conversation has to be understood within the context of the enormous growth in stature of economics and what I believe was a genuine thirst for knowledge about economic issues among students. The case is about opportunities to improve learning foregone.

Economics did broaden its methodological focus and substantive concerns in the decades after 1970. The initial impact of mathematical modeling between 1950 and the mid-1970s had been the elimination or narrowing of the range of topics addressed in teaching and research (Kreps, 1997, pp. 65-74). That reduction shifted, in part under the pressure of the 1960s to treat non-rational behaviors, uncertain goals, and disequilibrium with the same regard as the trinity of assumptions about rationality, goal orientation, and systemic equilibrium that had dominated the previous twenty years and, in part, by the growth of "professional school" economists who focused on what they considered real world problems.

A concrete example involving the concept of educational choice might be helpful in clarifying the argument. Econometric models stress the common and shared knowledge held by decision-makers, the application of rational self-interest to decision-making, purposeful action to pursue well-defined goals and a resulting equilibrium as educational providers and educational seekers adjust to one another. This model of rational decision-making with equally available information and clarity of purpose fails in the reality that when parents and their children make educational choice decisions, they rarely have the same knowledge as everyone else, often face or have racial and religious preferences and prejudices, may be poor or wealthy, decide under various kinds of peer and familial pressures, as well as sibling rivalries, and so forth. These can be put into econometric models, but they can also be examined in ways that invite conversation about the messiness of choices about education. Students are more than able to recognize this messiness, for they encounter it in myriad ways. The more the messiness is acknowledged, the more "real" the discussion to students, who observe and experience unpredictability and irrationality all around them. However, the messier the analysis is to the economist, the more unsatisfying the
approach. That, I think, separates undergraduates who are willing and may even delight in messiness from the academician’s desire for methodological tidiness.

The development of economics as a discipline is suggestive of how disciplines within the academy could become methodologically more sophisticated, more precise, and grow in stature and at the same time become less and less available to students. That is not, of course, a remarkable insight. More revealing, as occurs with the absence of concern about what students are actually learning, is that there is little to prevent and little protest against the widening gap between the faculty in the discipline and the undergraduate students who are ostensibly the faculty’s responsibility. Had it occurred simply in economics, such developments would have mattered little. But they occurred in other disciplines with much the same impact: as a discipline became more technical in its methodology, it lost its connection to undergraduate students. The end result was the creation of a powerful discipline-based academic organizational structure ostensibly designed to expand student learning but which failed to engender a conversation between faculty and undergraduate students on the serious issues that bound them as citizens.

5.6 Philosophy: the analytic (non) conversation

The discipline of philosophy took a path quite similar to economics, but it did so with even more devastating consequences for the conversation between itself and undergraduates.

From outside the discipline, it appeared that philosophy was poised for a substantial burst of enthusiasm and interest among students as World War II ended. Such issues as the nature of evil, social purposes, civic responsibility, and the role of the individual and the state—all of which had historically fallen within the domain of philosophy—looked ready to find a substantial student audience. This did not happen. Instead, philosophy opted for a narrowing of subject matter and methodological purity designed to separate itself from other, less rigorous disciplines and from philosophy’s own history. The dominance of analytic philosophy was first and foremost a triumph of methodology with its stress on precision and clarity, on tidiness in observing, understanding, and explaining the

scientific enterprise and the meaning of language. Its model was scientific precision and mathematical logic and it depended heavily on the “formal language of logical calculi,” a language “that combined clear structures of logic, mathematics, and the empirical sciences” (Nehamas, 1997, pp. 212–214).

As had occurred with economics, the outcome built upon prewar developments, but it was not inevitable. In the half-century before the war, philosophers engaged in a ferocious debate over how to respond to the growing authority of science and the trends toward specialization and professionalization within the academy. The struggle, as Daniel Wilson notes, “set the stage for the rise of technical, professional philosophy, later embodied in logical positivism and analytic philosophy” and in the process, philosophers “unintentionally created the basis for philosophy’s growing marginalization in 20th-century American culture, as the community of philosophic discourse contracted to a relatively small professional circle” (Wilson, 1990, pp. 1–2).

That outcome appeared self-evident in the years following the war, but the prior struggle had been a genuine one and the minority view kept latent its questions about community and civics that connected John Dewey and other pragmatists to the social concerns of the late 20th century. Yet the victors were clear: logical positivism and analytic and linguistic philosophy gave “substantive coherence” to the discipline, providing it with legitimate questions and methodologies. This approach to philosophy was self-conscious in rejecting the primacy of values, emotions, and normative judgments. Nor were philosophers to think of themselves as part of the same enterprise as historians and literary scholars, scholars with whom they had once been linked. Rather, philosophers in postwar America came to think of themselves “as participants in the enterprise of science” (Nehamas, 1997, p. 212).

There is a lot to be said for this emphasis on the precise, the logical, and the verifiable for it brought to the unfocused, the vague, and the irrational, ways of thinking that potentially allowed for the clarification and resolution of differences. But, as with mathematical model-building among economists, analytic philosophy had a way of driving alternative methodologies to the side and seeking to deny the messiness of ordinary life. In doing so, the discipline of
philosophy curbed its capacity to speak with wider audiences and, in the context of higher education, its conversation with undergraduates. Academic philosophy retreated from the public domain; it observed the world but refused to engage in it. The irony of this was patent: philosophy had the potential to (and often did) address issues of interest to diverse audiences, but it did so in extremely technical terms that excluded rather than invited participation. Analytic philosophers themselves showed little inclination to open the wider conversation. As Stanley Clavell put it in 1964, “For any of the philosophers who could be called analytical, popular discussion would be irrelevant... for the analyst, philosophy has become a profession, its problems technical; a non-professional audience is of no more relevance to him than it is to the scientist” (quoted in Daedalus, Winter, 1997, p. 224).

In the decades after 1970, philosophy broadened both the issues it addressed and its methodological approaches, in ways that parallel economics. To a substantial degree, Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1963) initiated the process of rethinking philosophy by reintroducing history into its daily work. A turning point came with the publication of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (1970), which had an impact across the social sciences and humanities, with a subsequent expression of interest by philosophers in issues of public policy, civic and ethical judgments, and feminist ideologies, and with the resurgence of John Dewey and Deweyan concerns with public life and problem solving. These developments have affected the teaching of philosophy within philosophy departments, but, as has also been the case with economics, the greatest influences have been felt in the teaching of applied philosophy in other arts and sciences departments and in medical, business, education, and law schools where ethical issues and European continental philosophers like Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida have found homes (Nehamas, 1997, pp. 217-218).

For all their substantial differences, then, philosophy and economics have traveled parallel paths. The promise of discourse between the growing numbers and diversity of undergraduates and the two disciplines was short-circuited and left unfulfilled as the disciplines focused on methodologies that stressed mathematical models and mathematics-like logic showing little inclination to take into account the messy world that students experienced and the questions they posed about their lives and society. About the two disciplines, historian Carl Schorske writes, “The intellectual quest for scientific objectivity and the professional advantages of a value-free neutrality reinforced each other in the establishment of a new methodological consensus as the basis of the discipline [of economics]... the analytic philosophers purged or marginalized traditional areas of concern where values and feelings played a decisive role. Ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and politics were all for a time equally excluded as the source of pseudo-problems that could not be formulated or addressed with the rigorous canons of epistemological reliability by and out of science” (Schorske, 1997, pp. 296-299).

Recently efforts to broaden the conversation across disciplines by expanding topics and acknowledging alternative forms of knowledge and ways of knowing have occurred, but these have affected teaching and learning more outside philosophy and economics departments than within them. For the most part the failure of conversation between the two disciplines and undergraduates has been viewed as unimportant by those within each discipline and, in any event, was often ascribed to the failure of the students. Indeed, a kind of “we are not to blame” defense has set in, claiming as Alexander Nehamas has written, that the public has “no patience for any position that is not virtually self-explanatory, refusing to take seriously any view that requires careful thought and that cannot receive practical application without serious and sometimes relatively long preparation” (Nehamas, 1997, p. 220). Such a view might make sense if university and college faculty were not so dependent upon the public and students to pay the bill.

### 5.7 Generating a learning conversation

A real and perhaps inevitable tension exists between questions about students’ learning—how much do they know, how do they learn, how do their experiences connect (or not) to their learning, what issues might challenge their minds or transform their ways of thinking and doing—and the questions faculty ask about the academic disciplines—what is known, what are the disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) questions, how should the discipline generate its ques-
tions, what are its methodologies. The different questions point in different directions. Pursuing one set rather than the other leads to quite a different understanding of what is important in the learning process.

Many professors weigh these differences seriously and, at their best, they synthesize the varied strands into a creative tension. But higher education as an entity, colleges and universities as institutions, and academic departments, including many interdisciplinary programs as collections of discipline-trained professors, have not historically made the relationship between the questions posed by how students learn and the questions posed by the disciplines as a center of attention. Professors tend to think about transferring knowledge based on the kinds of questions they might ask as disciplinary scholars. Students, in contrast, tend to think of knowledge that helps them understand and act in the world around them. Even in the best of circumstances this makes it difficult and, too often, seemingly impossible to have a sustained conversation about learning between professors and students. The absence of such a conversation has made the academy itself vulnerable, for too few students believe that the faculty or academic learning is the soul of higher education.

Do not misunderstand me. The evolution of the disciplines brought tremendous advances to our understanding of the world, substantively and methodologically. The disciplines have shown us that there are rigorous ways to ask questions, probe for answers, and summarize findings. In a relativistic world, they suggest that anyone's opinion is not as correct as anyone else's. The most important lesson we teach undergraduates is that some ways of analysis more effectively comprehend the universe than others. And, as research itself has become more interdisciplinary, so too has teaching. That said, the evolution of the academic disciplines has tended toward a rather narrow definition of what Lindblom and Cohen (1979) call "usable knowledge." The language and methods with which the disciplines work make it difficult to appreciate that using other lenses and methods are also valid ways of knowing. The disciplines in this way have worked to exclude a broader public—in Thomas Bender's phrase, they have engaged in "academic enclosure" (Bender, 1997, p. 7)—thus denying access to their knowledge and missing what the public knows and experiences as not being worth very much.

This combines with the tendency of the academic disciplines to misunderstand the discrepancy, in Charles Lindblom's words, "between widely accepted scientific ideals and actual feasible practice, a discrepancy that was not faced and intelligently dealt with but rather swept under the rug" (Lindblom, 1997, p. 233). Lindblom is referring specifically to the tensions within political science in the 1940s and 1950s between developing a science of political analysis and matching that to actual real world accomplishments. Similarly, Rogers Smith (1997) has argued that political science has historically wanted to be a pure science and contribute to buttressing democracy without recognizing that the desire has led to ideological blinders and has been impossible to accomplish in any event. Although their disciplinary reference point is political science, Lindblom's and Smith's arguments are applicable more generally. The academic disciplines sought scientific and methodological purity while neglecting to understand that subject matter itself became constrained and that ethical neutrality brings its own ideological baggage (Schorske, 1997).

The irony is hard to overstate; higher education entered the last half of the 20th century with an optimism never before seen in its history. An important and critical premise was that it could engage in the education of large numbers of people. And yet, even as students flocked to universities and colleges in droves, as governments expended vast sums in its support, and as local communities battled for the establishment of new campuses, scholars defined their fields in ways that made it difficult for people to understand them and in ways which proclaimed that the lack of communication did not matter. Not surprisingly, when faced with skepticism, from both outside and inside higher education, disciplinary scholars have rarely been able to convince skeptics. Even more telling, they have often viewed the skeptics and critics as irrelevant or so threatening as to require united defenses against the barbarians at the gates, leading to the view that the best defense is to convince outsiders that the subject matter was too complex for them to understand and they should, in effect, leave it alone.
Some of this has shifted. It was impossible for higher education to ignore the civil rights movement and racial conflict, the discovery of poverty and inequality, the protests over Vietnam, and the counterculture, especially when students were bringing the issues onto campuses and extending them to include the ways they were treated and taught. With the scandal of Watergate tarnishing the presidency, the shock of stagflation during the 1970s, and fears of a declining economy, the notion that scholarship and teaching should be immune from examination and revision was hard to sustain. Repeatedly, events outside higher education forced reexaminations—most recently, the worldwide financial collapse—literally demanding that colleges and universities relook at what students are actually learning. Rogers Smith’s conclusion about the impact of the 1960s and 1970s on political science is broader and takes on even more power today: “In that conflict-ridden era, political science could persuasively be accused of offering models that failed to reveal and challenge unjust inequalities; to produce any behavioral laws; or to predict, explain, or provide effective social guidance concerning the startling events then occurring. And most damning of all, to an embarrassing extent, the political science literature failed even to discuss these topics” (Smith, 1997, p. 260). Such a view applies just as forcefully today to the thousands of professors and scholars in professional schools whose work failed to focus on the realities underlying economic, social, and political institutions of the early 21st century.

That said, many scholars have changed the way they go about their business, and genuine debates over knowledge, its relationship to culture and values, and its presentation to students have occurred. Perhaps the most dramatic of these is the assertion of normative claims and the explicit discussion of values in scholarship, challenging the neutrality of method that the disciplines held so dear. New topics have been invented, in part as a result of “normative claims” around inequality, justice, discrimination, the influence of gender, ethical behavior, and the study of the previously unnoticed (Schorske, 1997; Kimball, 1988). One manifestation is the willingness with which philosophers contend with one another over public issues of morality and justice, as in the 1997 brief to the Supreme Court over the right to assisted suicide (The New York Review of Books, March 27, 1997). Another is the effort by educational researchers to bring their scholarly understanding of the effects of race-based financial aid to the Supreme Court (Linn and Welner, 2007). This shift to a more value-laden scholarship and to new topics that reflect normative concerns has provoked greater interest in the historical evolution of issues and of the disciplines themselves, in particular asking how things came about and why we study them in the ways we do, opening up still new approaches to fields of study (see also Walzer, 2006, Ackerman, 1991, 1998).

Real world experiences and direct observation have become fashionable. Research on “natural experiments” has grown in importance. The most remarkable methodological development is the immense popularity ethnographic research has achieved and where some of the most interesting methodological debates occur—about the immersion of the scholar in the life of the community being studied, about the relationship between those being studied and the studier, and about how replicable the findings are. These attest to a methodological shift toward qualitative research that seemed unlikely only a few decades ago. Undertaking scholarly research, quantitative and qualitative, on problems drawn from the experiences and dilemmas that people and institutions face has also increased the emphasis on the interaction between actors and structure, making indeterminacy and uncertainty a more prevalent conclusion than previously thought appropriate, wise, or scholarly (Lindblom, 1990). Disciplinary boundaries for researchers have blurred and many scholarly questions are generated by the dilemmas that people and institutions face, leading researchers to pursue whatever disciplinary approaches seem useful. Often this has had teaching consequences as more faculty than ever before teach in explicitly interdisciplinary undergraduate programs. More faculty who were trained within a discipline are thus doing research and teaching across disciplines; more undergraduates are enrolling in interdisciplinary majors; and more colleges and universities are establishing interdisciplinary teaching and research programs.

The growth of interdisciplinary research and teaching leaves higher education in an awkward organizational dilemma. Large numbers of faculty and students are engaged in interdisciplinary studies, but discipline-based departments remain the dominant
organizational basis for decision-making, with the departments often acting as if each discipline was an isolated and autonomous entity. With reference to literary studies and English departments, Catherine Gallagher writes: “[We] have applied ourselves to the building of interdepartmental, rather than departmental, institutions: humanities institutes, interdisciplinary journals, women’s studies programs, ethnic studies programs, film studies, team-teaching programs, and the like. While we attended to these institutional tasks, we avoided translating our ideas into coherent graduate programs... This fact may indicate that we are in the midst of an enormous institutional shift away from the traditional departments even though we continue to locate our professional training inside those [departmental] structures” (Gallagher, 1997, p. 152). That graduate doctoral programs have been so slow to acknowledge these shifts is especially disturbing since the shift toward interdisciplinary is so congruent with how many researchers actually go about their business.3

The rise of the professional schools and professional programs to prominence and the consequent diminution of the arts and sciences—phenomena that evolved rapidly in the 1990s under pressure to produce more “real world” and vocationally oriented programs—suggests that the traditional arts and sciences disciplines have had a difficult time engaging students in conversations about their work. There has also been a growth in orientation toward theoretical concerns, with contradictory results. Current theories almost always bring issues of race, gender, social class, ethnicity, and culture into the classroom. They tend to emphasize the historical moment, power and authority, the interaction between actors and structure, and the relative nature of values. These theoretical interests have thus had the effect of making scholarly questions seem both immediate and controversial, a scholar’s dream and a student’s delight. And yet the fascination with theory has many of the same ingredients as the economist’s mathematical model-building and the philosopher’s insistence that only logical analysis matters: it communicates a view that only those who understand the theory and the language, who have, in effect, the right theoretical toolbox, can engage in the debate.

The developments described above have created tremendous uncertainty in scholarship and in teaching. What is the core of each discipline? Should there be a core? What do students need to know? Not all the disciplines have been equally affected by the debates. English departments are engulfed by them. History departments have diversified their understanding of what students need to know without necessarily tearing themselves apart. Economics and philosophy departments have often stood their ground, although the financial crisis that began toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century may have changed that. Certainly economists and philosophers outside of economics and philosophy departments have been active in taking up new methods and topics. Yet for all the differences among the disciplines, questions in higher education about what is taught, what should be taught, and how much is being learned have started to have influence. Often initiated by external agencies expressing critical doubt about the amount and quality of learning occurring among undergraduates, sometimes taking shape as arguments over political values or between new and old scholars, debates about the quality of what college students are learning have moved to the fore. For some within higher education, the debates are treated with scorn as an intrusion into their academic freedom to teach what and how they wish. Among others a kind of mournfulness appears, as if of an orderly world of the past has been shattered, a time when history, not women’s history or African-American history, was taught and learned. But sometimes there is enthusiasm about addressing questions about teaching and learning, an enthusiasm generated by the possibilities of change.

Clearly, questions about the disciplines and their relationship to undergraduate learning are not easily answered. Students now have few required courses and lots of choices and the size of the curriculum remains unwieldy, testimony that faculty specialization remains dominant. It is almost impossible to tell the difference between elementary and advanced courses, except perhaps by the numbers of students enrolled in them. While it is fashionable to argue that the dismantling of a once orderly curriculum was due to the failure of

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3 On calls for graduate research training based on interdisciplinarity and real world concerns, see Yehuda Elkana (2005).
nerve and the collapse of faculty authority in the face of external conditions, the curriculum disorder of the last decades is part of a disciplinary revision that began at least in the 19th century and was rooted in the dismantling of what had once been the core of each discipline. The canon may have been challenged from without higher education, but its breaking occurred from within as discipline-trained faculty looked for new problems and alternative ways to resolve them.

One should not underestimate the complexity of generating a conversation about the disciplines and their relationship to student learning. It is not easy to determine what really matters within a discipline when almost anything can be studied and a variety of methodologies are appropriate to their study. We know incredibly little about the relationship of knowledge to how students learn. Nor is it easy even to hold on to the notion that any discipline is a unique entity when so many of the same or similar issues are studied in multiple disciplines and in similar ways, whatever the professional training of the scholar. Add to these genuinely complex dilemmas the tendencies to view all potential changes through their marketability—whether they can be sold to students and funders—to phrase them in politically-charged terms or as a cover for fiscal cutbacks and the enormity of the problems are apparent.

What we do know is that students are badly under-learning and that colleges and universities do not seem capable or even willing to reverse the situation. As Derek Bok (2007) persuasively argues, many students show little improvement in writing, moral reasoning, critical thinking, and quantitative skills. Most students do not learn a foreign language, seem to develop few new cultural and aesthetic interests, and do not learn what might be considered necessary skills to participate as informed and active citizens in a democracy. This would seem to achieve the level of scandal, but almost no attention seems to be paid to this evidence by professors when they teach or discuss teaching, the latter an all too infrequent occurrence.

In fact, when looked upon from the perspective of undergraduate students, the current situation raises marvelous opportunities, for it suggests ways of looking at scholarly dilemmas that can and ought to be appealing to students, especially as the undergraduate student population itself now runs the age and experiential gamut. The possibilities of a genuine and vigorous conversation occurring between students and faculty, however, will require both a commitment on the part of the faculty to that end and a willingness to acknowledge that conversation between students and the disciplines requires a shared sense of participation and worth. And that is not easy to come by.
Introduction

Education is something you do, not something you get. ¹

The University of Washington's Study of Undergraduate Learning (UW SOUL) was a four-year study conducted from fall 1999 to spring 2003. The study tracked 304 students ² as they moved through their college experience and focused on six areas of their learning: writing, critical thinking/problem solving, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, understanding and appreciating diversity, and personal growth. The purpose of this book is to share with faculty, administrators, students, and others what the UW SOUL participants told us about their learning through four years of interviews, surveys, focus groups, and submissions of coursework. Our hope is that the book will convey what we learned and what colleges and universities can learn by listening closely and in a number of ways to a sample of students over time.

The study had several purposes. First, we wanted to know what students learned and where they learned it in their undergraduate programs. Second, because our focus was assessment, we wanted to identify what helped students learn, as well as the obstacles or challenges to learning that they faced. Third, like most undergraduates attending most colleges and universities, our students are rarely asked to evaluate their own experience in depth, and we wanted to hear what students would say when asked to do this kind of reflection. Fourth, we wanted to learn what we could about students’ personal development and the role that the university experience plays in that growth. Finally, we wanted to keep together a group of students whose opinions on University of Washington (UW) initiatives or current issues could be polled.

In addition to these purposes, we wanted to create a study that could maintain enough flexibility in its design to respond to ideas, questions, and directions
Inside the Undergraduate Experience

The University of Washington's Study of Undergraduate Learning

Catharine Hoffman Beyer
Gerald M. Gillmore
Andrew T. Fisher

University of Washington
set by faculty and staff. If a faculty member, for example, had a question that fell within our study purposes, we wanted to be able to accommodate her. In fact, we were able to do this, asking study participants questions that came from UW faculty, regents, and department chairs, as well as from faculty at community colleges.

The UW SOUL has allowed us to see students' experiences in two ways: close up, focused tightly on individuals, and from a distance, giving us an aggregate view of the group. These two views gave us the opportunity to look and marvel at how students become participants in fields of knowledge, how they grow and meet challenges, how they display amazing insights at the same time that they may be repeating previous mistakes, and how they learn about themselves and their world, even from thin sources.

Jeremy's Path
The longitudinal view, student by student, made clear the unique path each student took, and throughout this book we share some of these rich stories. We begin with Jeremy Nolan's story. In September 1999, Jeremy Nolan became one of the 12 million undergraduates enrolled in colleges and universities across the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), one of 4,515 new freshman to enter the University of Washington, and a participant in the UW SOUL. Jeremy entered the UW planning to enroll in one of the largest majors on campus—business—so that he could become a stockbroker.

Jeremy's career choice was influenced by his search for ways to invest his inheritance after his father had committed suicide, and after the bitter probate battle that he and his brother went through. Jeremy said:

A family friend knew a good stockbroker, and I asked questions about everything. I started exploring it, finding out more about it, and I thought "I could do this." I wanted a 9 to 5 job, a suit and a tie in a downtown office building. So I thought being a stockbroker was it.

But by the time he graduated, Jeremy's passion for the suit, the tie, and the stockbroker's license had cooled, and the world of business and downtown offices was more than a jungle away.

What happened to Jeremy Nolan between the day he entered the UW, certain that he would collect his business degree, and the day during his senior year, when, sitting in an island jungle far away from Seattle, Washington, he wrote the following list of the 11 things that he most wanted to do:

- Work in Antarctica (sp?)
- Capuchin field site in Costa Rica
- Teach English in foreign country
- Trek through Africa/climb Mt. Kilimanjaro
- Scuba instructor in Thailand
- Ph.D.
- EMT
- Skydive
- Bungee jump
- Snowboard
- See Mt. Everest (possibly climb...?)

Jeremy's path through the UW was marked by several major turns. We know, for instance, that in his first quarter at the UW, Jeremy took a popular, large lecture class, Psychology 101. While waiting outside his teaching assistant's office one day, he saw a flyer for the Indonesian Field Study Program 2000. Jeremy decided to apply. "I applied not thinking I would get accepted, because it seemed like a rigorous program meant only for upperclassmen. But I wanted the experience of applying. Remember, I was the high school student who had applied for 58 scholarships."

Contrary to his expectations, Jeremy was accepted into the program. In the summer after his freshman year, Jeremy went to Tinjil Island in Indonesia to study monkeys. There on the island, Jeremy's ideas about his future changed. As he described it in an interview:

There I was in the middle of the Indian Ocean on this tiny island. White sand beaches surrounding me. The island surrounded by coral reefs. Beautiful fish everywhere. Immaculate sunsets every night. The island was a jungle—plants and vines you've never seen before. All around you are these sounds you've never heard before—insects, birds, monkeys, snakes—critters. One day, I was walking along and there were monkeys in the trees overhead and on the ground, monkeys swinging from branch to branch, and I said to myself, "Okay, I'm in
Indonesia. I'm in a jungle. There are monkeys all around me.
I could probably do this for the rest of my life."

Later, Jeremy would write of his time on Tinjil Island: "I can describe my
experience as nothing short of life changing." The close group of friends Jeremy
developed during his time on the island was also "very inspirational," and so
after Jeremy's path had taken him to Tinjil Island, it made another turn, taking
him away from the business major to a major in primatology.

In addition to the field experiences that led him to focus on primatology,
Jeremy told us about some of the courses that helped him decide on this field.
He took a course the following year, for example, that taught him how to write
like a scientist, as he learned how to measure infant monkeys for a study on
infant primate development.

But Jeremy's life as a college student contained more than a sudden love of
primates. Among an exhausting array of activities and interests, Jeremy was an
active member of a fraternity and a summer employee for a computer company.
The summer after his idyllic moment on Tinjil Island, this computer company
sent Jeremy to its New York office. He told us about setting out to make a delivery
at the World Trade Center on September 11 and, instead, finding himself
suddenly working as a volunteer for the Red Cross.

The experience blocked the direct path he seemed to be taking to a Ph.D. in
primatology. "I felt totally helpless," he said. "When I came back to school fall
quarter, I had no motivation." While he continued to do well in his courses,
Jeremy began to drift, as he sorted through his experience in New York on 9/11.

During his junior year, Jeremy continued his work in primatology, and his
research paper on captive orangutans received attention from scholars in his field.
The summer after his junior year, Jeremy traveled alone through Singapore,
Saigon, Cambodia, and Bangkok on his way to his second research experience
on Tinjil Island. This time his research focus on the island was on ecology—the
effects the monkeys had on the environment. Two excerpts from Jeremy's Tinjil
Island journal during his second visit capture some of his experience there:

Thursday, 8 August 2002. So there I was, 100 meters south of
the SHF trail with a troop of monkeys passing as if I wasn't
there. I know, I know, this happens everyday at base camp, but
this was different, this was the jungle. Monkeys were out of
the trees on the ground, walking within inches of me, like I
wasn't there. I looked east and walking towards me was Big
Mamma, a huge pregnant female. We made eye contact and
she just continues walking right up behind me. I wanted to
step out of the way and say, "Pardon me, Ma'am," but that
would have scared her into the trees.

Monday, 12 August 2002. I guess my first mistake was to
start a relationship with the girl that Abba, the beta male, was
head over heels for. Female 863 walked into my life two years
ago and she's been in my heart ever since. Because 863 is so
special to me, I'd always keep a banana or two for her and she
would sit right next to me and eat her treat. Lately, 863 has
been receptive (in estrus) and Abba has taken a special liking
to her. He'd follow her everywhere, and I assume he was jeal-
ous of me. I don't think she digs Abba as much as she digs me.
When he tries to inspect her, she sits; when he moves closer,
she moves. As she was sitting near me today and out of the
corner of my eye, I see Abba begin to lunge at me. His weight
on the branch brings him down to eye level. Oh shit, he's
about three feet away from me and wants to fight. I stand up
and show how big I am compared to him, and he longs. I
step back in just enough time to miss his teeth. I look down
at Abba on the ground and he lunges again, catching me off
guard, but misses. I scream like a 6-year-old girl at the haunt-
ed house and jump back. I pull out my machete and swing to
get distance. Finally, he backs off, and I check my boxers for
any messes. None. Good. Back to work.

When Jeremy returned, he decided to add a second major, biology, to his
undergraduate program, postponing graduation by another year. He was back
on the primatology track but, with his list of the 11 things that he wished to do
in hand, he was not sure that he would pursue a Ph.D. after his undergraduate
degree. When asked in his fourth year about how he had changed since high
school, Jeremy said, "I've done this reversal since high school, maybe because I
have experienced so many more things than when I was working at Safeway, try-
ing to pay off my truck."

Close to the end of UW SOUL data collection in 2003, Jeremy applied for
a leadership training grant to support a project he initiated in March of that
year. In the short term, Jeremy hoped to get children interested in conservation.
About this goal, he wrote in his application, "nonhuman primates are among the
most imperiled fauna. Primates are large, charismatic mammals, and conse-
cquently, they are a powerful flagship species for conservation efforts." In the
long term, Jeremy hoped to inspire an interest in college in these young stud-
ents. Jeremy also wrote that the project was an important way he hoped to give
something back to a broad community that he felt had supported him in his own growth. However, he did not get the grant.

Jeremy Nolan graduated at the end of winter quarter, 2004, with degrees in biology and psychology and minors in anthropology and quantitative science. He was a published author, had done research with scholars at other institutions, and at the end of that quarter was deciding what to do next on his list of 11 things.

Other Individual Paths
Not all students at the UW and in the UW Study of Undergraduate Learning walked a path as serendipitous as Jeremy’s. Michael Rodriguez, for example, came to the UW hoping to put his fascination and experience with computers together with a business degree. He applied to and was rejected by majors four times—twice by the business major and twice by informatics—because his GPA was below their cut-offs for admission to the major. Finally, Michael was accepted into the geography major. Going through those rejections was both depressingly worrisome, but in a focus group during his senior year, Michael said this about the major he landed in after working hard to get into others:

My major, geography, has opened my eyes to the inequalities around us. Geography has changed how I think. I was open to poverty before, especially since I came from the Philippines. But before I came here, I was interested in making money. Geography changed this. I am still interested in [computers and technology], but now I have this desire to change the world. I am interested in teaching, and after I graduate, I am going to do Teach for America. I want to help empower people with education.

Some students did not make it to their senior year. Nicole Gamborino, for example, dropped out after her first year at the UW. Nicole’s grades plummeted after one of her closest friends was shot and killed on the busy street that borders the university in a widely publicized incident. She was already struggling financially to stay in college, and these financial and academic difficulties suddenly seemed impossible in the wake of her friend’s violent death. As Nicole described it:

He was my best friend. He was the type of person who, you would walk into a room, and he would be smiling for no apparent reason. He was always enthused about everything he did—even eating a taco. It wasn’t just a normal taco, but the

best one he ever ate. He was around me every day, and it was hard for me to go back to that environment without him in it and concentrate and focus on anything. His girlfriend, my best girlfriend, left college after that too, so I didn’t have anything that I had when I came.

Kate McDonald also left the UW, but her leaving turned out to be temporary. In her first interview, Kate’s comments about what she wanted to learn at the UW showed great enthusiasm for being there:

I want to learn about life in the city, about science. I want to pick a field and become knowledgeable about it. I want to learn about the community, how it works. I want to learn about living with a person. The roommate experience is totally new to me. I want to learn how to compromise, how to work together, how to be a better leader, how to ride the Metro bus system, where all the cool places to hang out in Seattle are, what it feels like to live somewhere where it rains more than nine inches a year, how it feels to work with a professor who is on the cutting edge of knowledge and is passionate about what he is doing. I want to become more passionate about things.

But after two years, Kate was disappointed with her education, unsure about the science major she had selected, and lonely. Kate transferred to another public university closer to her home town and took classes in religion and communication. She returned to the UW and the science major she had left behind after a year away, saying that the classes she had taken during that time were “wonderful classes, and I felt like I had a break and learned some of the stuff I wanted to learn without having to relate it to my degree.” In thinking about the decisions to leave and then to come back, Kate said:

I felt that I was able to take hold of things and make decisions to get out of a bad situation at both times. It felt good to make a decision to change things in a big way. It helped me to have some physical and emotional distance from the situation I was in, so I could look back at it and say, “Is this what I want? What can I change and what will remain the same?”

Some students’ paths through the UW were easier than others. All of them had sweet moments and traumas. The UW SOUL allowed us to learn about such moments for many students. To share what we learned about individual
paths, we have included case studies and many quotations from study participants in this book.

**Shared Paths**

The second view the study afforded was collective. In addition to a view of the unique paths of individual students that we observed, we have seen similarities in the experiences shared by many of the students and by subgroups of students. To provide this collective view, we analyzed qualitative data in ways that allowed us to aggregate results whenever possible. We also applied statistical analyses to student responses to scaled survey items, looking for systematic changes over time and differences by gender, ethnic groups, and areas of major. This approach showed us, for example, that for most of the students much of the first year at college is about becoming independent, in every sense of that word. We also have seen how being “humbled” in some way, whether at the hands of introductory calculus or from rejection by a roommate, is very much a part of the first-year experience and that finding a clear direction is part of the second year’s process for most students. To give readers a sense of the shared paths students walked, we present similarities among students within subgroups, most notably in disciplinary areas where students tend to show different patterns of learning even before they have chosen a particular area of study. We also present broader similarities in the chapters that follow.

**Impetus for the Study**

The impetus for the UW SOUL came from three related directions, listed here and detailed in subsections that follow. First, we felt that theories on student development in college did not capture the full chaotic complexity of that development. Second, we wanted to bring assessment attention back to students and their experiences as learners, after a time when it has felt as though the assessment movement in our state, as elsewhere, was in danger of being replaced by the requirement for accountability measures. These measures are aimed at evaluating institutions in areas such as retention and graduation efficiency, aspects of performance that can be described with a number. Our desire to refocus attention on student learning was articulated beautifully in fall 1999, just as we were starting the study, by Pat Hutchings and Lee Shulman in their article, “The Scholarship of Teaching,” published in *Change* magazine:

> Imagine . . . a kind of institutional research that asks much tougher, more central questions: What are our students really learning? What do they understand deeply? What kinds of human beings are they becoming—intellectually, morally, in terms of civic responsibility? How does our teaching affect that learning, and how might it do so more effectively? These are, in fact questions that the assessment movement . . . put into the picture at some campuses, but they’re hardly questions we’ve finished with. If we reconceived “institutional research” to be about such questions, in the service of its faculties, led by faculty members, then the scholarship of teaching would not be some newly conceived arena of work, or a new route to tenure, but a characteristic of the institution that took learning seriously. (p. 15)

We photocopied those words and literally kept them in front of us as we began the UW SOUL. The words of Hutchings and Shulman bring us to the third impetus: our personal paths to the study of undergraduate student learning.

**Theories of Student Development in College**

Much has been written in the last 30 years about students’ progress through college, and a number of well articulated and well tested theories have been proposed. We decided, however, not to design our study as a measure of theoretical premises. First, ours was an assessment study; and, like Richard Light’s (2001) book that reports results of 10 years of interviews with Harvard seniors, our particular interest was in learning what happened to students as they moved through the University of Washington’s academic environment. With such specificity, we hoped to be able to offer faculty, staff, and others ideas about what students said worked well in their experience at the UW and what needed improvement, while also generating information that might be useful to other institutions. Our focus was on learning and not primarily on college student development, although our data have given us a number of insights on development that we share in this book.

A second reason that we did not structure the study to test a theory on student development in college was that we could not find a theory that we felt fully represented the complex messiness students described in speaking about that experience. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have noted, the early theories concerning college student development are almost all psychological. The psychosocial theories of the development of traditionally college-aged adults—beginning with Erik Erikson’s (1968) theory of the relationship between crisis and identity response and Arthur Chickering’s (1969) seven vectors leading to
students' development of integrity—as well as the cognitive-structural theories—such as William Perry's (1970, 1981) nine stages of college student development and Kitchener and King's (1981) theory of the development of reflective judgment—are rooted in stage-based assumptions about student change. These theories assume that college students develop along a linear and progressive path, rather than paths that, while they share some broad features, are also iterative, dynamic, chaotic, and bumpy, as our interactions with students seemed to suggest.

Furthermore, though they argue that the contexts in which students find themselves matter, the psychosocial and cognitive theories never fully address the ways that an environment might, for example, toss a student backward into an earlier stage. Also, as Dannefer (1984) points out, neither do these theories address the very specific ways the environment might launch a student toward the next level of her development. As an assessment study, our focus was not so much on where students landed as it was on how they got there. As Banta, Lund, Black, and Olander (1996) noted, the assessment of teaching and learning processes that lead to learning are as important as a focus on whether outcomes have been met.

In addition to assumptions about students' linear progress and lack of specificity about the relationship of environment to change (out of necessity, given the scope of these models), the psychosocial and cognitive models suggest that all students proceed along the same path. This argument was challenged more than 20 years ago on the basis of gender by Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), and later by Baxter Magolda's (1992) luminous book, *Knowing and Reasoning in College*. Cross-cultural scholars and scholars who study race and ethnicity have also raised questions about the universalism assumption apparent in most developmental theories (Cross, 1991; Tarum, 1997). Finally, scholars who have noted the ways that academic disciplines shape students' learning experiences raise questions about the "one-path" theories, most notably Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000), Biglan's (1973), Bazerman (2000), Wineburg (1991), Donald (2002), and Shulman's (1986, 1987) work on teacher education.

Our own conversations with students suggested that while they may experience broad changes at similar times in their college years, their paths were also unique. Also, it seemed obvious that a student could simultaneously occupy several of Perry's stages of cognitive development—one in her chemistry course, another in her Asian American studies class, and yet another in her thinking about whom to vote for in the next election—all in a given academic term. In addition, students seemed sometimes to reverse direction—moving away from a more relativist perspective to a more black-and-white view on, say, the causes of cultural change among the Kung. And one student's movement might be quite different from his movement on another issue, as well as quite different from another student's movement. Race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, residence, and other factors noted by environmental theorists and others certainly seemed to play a role in determining those differences.

However, for the students we could see up close, we felt that degrees of difference among them were even finer than broad demographic categories could account for. For one thing, what they knew and how they grew seemed shaped by their academic majors to a great extent, which meant that their intellectual development was uneven and "domain specific" (Fisher, Beyer, & Gillmore, 2001; Shulman, 2002). A student majoring in computer science and engineering, for example, might think in highly sophisticated and complex ways about concepts and issues in that field, but she might think about politics dualistically. Also, what students learned seemed equally dependent on who they were when they came in and what kinds of experiences they came from. Jeremy Nolan applied to go to Tinjil Island as a freshman, even though it seemed clear that the program was for advanced psychology majors, because he had a history of applying for things. We saw students' paths acting on their present experiences again and again. As Bransford et al. (2000) state:

They come to formal education with a range of prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts that significantly influence what they notice about the environment and how they organize and interpret it. This background, in turn, affects their abilities to remember, reason, solve problems, and acquire new knowledge. (p. 10)

These problems with the psychosocial and cognitive models of student development seemed to suggest that we could more readily embrace interactionist theories of student development in college. Interactionist theories focus on points of impact in college, such as Astin's (1993a) "I-E-O" model. Astin's descriptive model argues that input, or what the student brings to college, is acted upon by a wide range of influences in the college environment, such as interactions with faculty, peers, and clubs, to bring about what the student is when she leaves college—or the "output." In his study, Astin uses data from the annual Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey to answer the question of what value college adds to students' learning, among other things. His findings show the importance of the level of students' involvement in academic and nonacademic activities. Tinto's model (1987, 1993), which focuses on student attrition, argues that the intentions and commitments that students bring to college are constantly changed by the interactions students have with
the people and experiences they encounter in college. Further, Tinto argues that college students who form early personal connections with a faculty or staff member are more likely to stay in school than those who do not make such connections. Lending support to this argument, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that research showed that advising, orientation, and academic support programs were often correlated with student retention and graduation.

These environmental arguments fit better with our sense of student development than the psychosocial or cognitive-structural theories, but the environmental theories also seemed aimed too broadly for our specific questions. CIRP data give one an astronaut's view of students' experience, and results seem sometimes to rest on assumptions about what students mean and how well their definitions of terms agree when completing the CIRP survey. A student at the UW who checked the "very satisfied" box about his "general education or core curriculum," for example, might have had a radically different experience from that of a student at a comparable institution who also checked the "very satisfied" box—so what do we know when we learn that students at research universities are "very satisfied" with their general education? When students check the box that indicates that their professors frequently provided them with "intellectual challenge and stimulation," what does that mean their professors actually did? Perhaps even more important, how can such results lead to institutional improvement? While we laud the contribution CIRP (and particularly Astin's [1993a] tracking of it) has made to broad understandings of students' experiences, we were interested in a closer view that might point the way to improvement.

Finally, with regard to Astin's (1993a) model, we wondered whether the inputs could reach into their output, spinning him off in an unexpected direction, or whether the college environment could be invaded by external times, places, and events, and, consequently, be altered by it. Jeremy Nolan is a perfect example of the messiness and the backward-forward motion that environmental models have a hard time capturing. In the words of Peter Ewell (1997), "the learner is not a receptacle of knowledge, but rather creates his or her learning actively and uniquely... Learning is about making meaning for each individual learner by establishing and reworking patterns, relationships, and connections." (p. 3).

Ewell's words and research on how people learn, presented by Bransford et al. (2000) for the National Research Council, suggest a constructivist perspective. Our own experiences inside academia, as well as our questions, led us to those perspectives that argue that learning and knowledge are created in very particular social contexts. As members of an institution arranging itself into communities (academic departments) that create distinct ways of doing similar things, we believe that social constructivist arguments mirror a reality we see every day. However, we also agree with scholars such as Tsoukas (2000) and Block (1999), who argue that a belief in social construction does not contradict belief in realities that exist separate from individuals' creations. Searle (1995) argues that social constructions are the result of collective intentionality and tacit or explicit agreement, a characteristic that seemed to apply well to some of the knowledge and practices created in and by academic disciplines, but not to everything equally. As Block (1999) points out, "Leukemia is not a social construction or creation." (p. 200), and neither are the treatments designed in and by academic disciplines to cure it. Our understanding of where realism ends and construction begins in the wide range of academic disciplines at the UW is limited. Therefore, while UW SOUL findings sometimes supported constructivist perspectives, we did not set out to validate them.

Of all the theories we reviewed, we felt most strongly connected to the sociological argument about emerging adulthood put forth by Arnett (2000). Arnett argues that the previous markers of adulthood—school completion, marriage, a permanent residence, parenthood, and others—no longer effectively indicate the beginning of adulthood, because 18–25 year olds are now delaying those activities. Furthermore, Arnett's earlier study (1997) of 18–25 year olds showed that, except for parenthood, 18–25 year olds do not believe that those markers are valid criteria for their entry into adulthood. In contrast, their own criteria for adulthood include accepting responsibility for themselves, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.

Arnett argues that some cultures better foster a prolonged period of identity and role exploration than others. The cultural context in the U.S. is tolerant of such exploration. Indeed, it seems clear that cultural changes in the last 20 years have made a wide range of experiences possible for college-aged men and women. For example, young people in this group have access to easy travel opportunities as well as a shared value for traveling as a way of learning; a wide range of ways to take college courses; the possibility and practice of having multiple romantic partners, perhaps related to the relative freedom from the fear of pregnancy; and a wide range of athletic possibilities that range from back-country snowboarding to local Frisbee golf teams for women as well as for men. Furthermore, access to information about these experiences, including access to information provided by people as they are experiencing them, is only a "Google search" away.

It seemed to us that inside U.S. culture, no culture is more tolerant of exploration than colleges and universities in general. Students attending large, public research universities have easy access to an especially bewildering array of experiences and opportunities. For example, students in the UW SOUL joined the cycling team; learned to white-water kayak and began competing in that sport; traveled to Italy, South Africa, Madagascar, Brazil, England, Ireland, Spain,
Germany, India, China, Japan, and Indonesia; worked as volunteers in rural Washington, in the Seattle public school system, and with refugees learning to read; met the love of their lives; broke up with long-time lovers; experimented sexually; gave poetry readings; passed as the opposite sex; changed jobs; joined and quit gyms; went backpacking for the first time; taught snowboarding; and acted in plays. While not unique to university students nor equally accessible to them, these experiences and others like them mentioned by our UW SOUL participants suggest that college campuses offer young people unusual ranges of choices for change and exploration.

As Arnett (2000) describes this period:

Emerging adulthood . . . is a period characterized by change and exploration for more people, as they examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work and worldviews. . . . As scholars, we can characterize emerging adulthood as a period when change and exploration are common, even as we recognize the heterogeneity of the period and investigate this heterogeneity as one of emerging adulthood's distinguishing characteristics. (p. 480)

This book embraces Arnett's idea of a period of heterogeneity, of exploration that spills over academic boundaries and blurs distinctions between what is learned in Anthropology 101 and what is learned in Solstice, a local coffee shop; of developmental paths that move forward and back and forward again, and of a culture that actively fosters variety.

Assessment as a Driving Force for the Study

While we were interested in ideas about college student development, the UW Study of Undergraduate Learning primarily grew out of the authors' long-term experience with assessment in higher education and our concern about the direction in which assessment seemed to be heading. In the mid-to late-1980s when state governments first required public universities to be more publicly accountable through assessment, the call was for standardized testing. One of this book's authors, Gerald Gilmore, was a key participant in a State of Washington research project that evaluated standardized achievement tests of rising juniors and included the participation of students and faculty from two- and four-year institutions of higher education throughout the state (Washington Council of Presidents and State Board for Community College Education, 1989). This research has national implications because it demonstrated the ineffectiveness of a one-size-fits-all standardized testing approach to assessment. The study showed that standardized tests for critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and writing were insensitive to what students actually learned in college and that faculty found the results neither valid nor useful in planning instruction.

In 1989 the Washington state legislature gave every public two- and four-year institution of higher education budgets for assessment, and at the UW, as well as nationally, the next phase of assessment became focused on campus-specific activities. Those of us working in assessment greatly admired the work at Alverno College and a few other colleges that wove assessment into the fabric of their curricula, but the size and hands-off culture of our large research institution made such fully integrated approaches daunting. Therefore, we began by working on assessment projects with the faculty and programs most open to assessment, as well as by performing some institution-wide surveying of students. Our early emphasis was influenced by the thinking of assessment leaders who emphasized classroom-based assessment, such as Angelo and Cross (1993), and we designed and used various strategies to help us understand and increase student learning, with little generalization possible beyond particular classes.

It was at this point that another of this book's authors, Catharine Beyer, along with her colleague, Joan Graham, initiated a series of studies on writing (Beyer & Graham, 1990, 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Beyer, 1997). At the time, Beyer was a faculty member in the Department of English's Interdisciplinary Writing Program, a program Graham has directed since 1978 that links writing courses with courses in the disciplines. The purpose of their studies was assessment of college-level writing, and the three qualitative studies they conducted tracked the writing experience of large samples of students through their undergraduate coursework.

The years between 1989 and 1997 were marked at the UW by a number of rich assessment projects. In addition to the studies on student writing, we worked with projects focusing on large lecture courses and academic programs, including nursing and psychology. These studies became important touchstones for the UW SOUL. Assessment of academic programs suggested that departments had differing methods for determining whether their students had learned, as well as differing goals for that learning. These differences came back to us, as we analyzed data from UW SOUL participants. In addition, the writing studies conducted from 1989-1997 showed us the wealth and depth of data that qualitative methods could provide, and we designed our methods for UW SOUL accordingly.

Toward the end of this creative and productive era, the State Higher Education Coordinating Board identified four areas of learning that all institutions were required to assess: writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and information literacy. These areas were broad enough to cover at least some
aspect of every disciplinary context in two- and four-year institutions of higher education.

Then the state legislature changed its focus from assessment of student learning to accountability. State legislatures (and the federal government) rightly wish to hold public educational institutions accountable for their performance. While there may be a natural affinity between assessment and accountability, there are unfortunately some differences between the two. For one, the accountability movement seeks quantifiable measures of successful academic performance, such as graduation rates, because such measures allow for easy comparisons to performance standards across campuses. Thus, for the most part, accountability operationalizes performance as something that can be captured with a number or two. In contrast, while assessment also makes use of quantifiable data, its focus is on learning. Learning is complex. It cannot often be captured with a single number or even a single set of measures. Assessment recognizes this complexity, and seeks both to understand and preserve it.

Another difference between accountability and assessment is that accountability indicators are almost always imposed from outside, while assessment indicators are almost always developed from within. This means that accountability measures must, by definition, be general, while assessment measures can take into account the unique cultures and practices of the places where learning occurs. In addition, assessment focuses on improvement. In contrast, accountability often leads to punitive action (although it no longer does in our own state), and punitive action can impede improvement. In *Our Underachieving Colleges*, Bok (2006) speaks eloquently about the inability of punitive action to effect improvement, noting, among other things, the strangeness of rewarding schools that are already doing well by giving them more resources and of punishing schools that are doing poorly by removing resources from them that they could have used to improve their work.

Inevitably, if an institution is required to focus primarily on accountability, it loses some or all of its focus on assessment. This loss is at least partially the result of scarce resources—time and energy. As accountability was beginning to dominate the many state legislative conversations about public education at the end of the nineties, Thomas Angelo (1999) wrote these words about assessment and accountability in higher education:

> Today, most faculty and faculty administrators have finally, if reluctantly, come to accept that dealing with both [assessment and accountability] is a political and economic inevitability. Nonetheless, most of us think assessment should be first and foremost about improving student learning and secondarily about determining accountability for the quality of learning produced. In short: Though accountability matters, learning still matters most. (p. 3)

At the same time that accountability was becoming a focus of state legislatures, assessment was becoming a force in accreditation. In the early to mid-nineties, accrediting bodies for professional schools, such as nursing and engineering, required programs to identify learning goals for students and to demonstrate that they were assessing them. Also at this time, regional associations of schools, colleges, and universities required academic institutions to respond in their accreditation self-studies to Standard 2b, which asked institutions how they were measuring the learning of all their students. In effect, accrediting agencies adopted an assessment model for evaluating the effectiveness of institutions’ undergraduate programs, just at the time when state legislatures were focusing on other models.

However, as powerful as those accrediting agencies are, their new standards were not bringing about rapid educational change. In their excellent overview of the assessment movement from a national perspective, Lazerson, Wengen, and Shumanis (2000) note a study conducted by Celia Lopez, associate director of the North Central Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities, which showed that the 320 institutions that went through the North Central accreditation process between 1997 and 1999 were all only at the beginning stages of their assessment processes.

In early 1999 when we began seriously discussing the possibility of a longitudinal study of student learning, we could see that the value of assessment was making inroads throughout many academic communities at the UW. For example, more of the faculty truly understood the difference between teaching goals and learning goals. More often than in the early days of assessment, we saw faculty trying to change their instruction in accordance with information they were gathering formally and informally about what students were and were not learning in their classes. Departments had developed capstone courses for their majors, which had the potential to provide evidence for whether the stated or unstated goals of the major were being met. And goals and assessment/evaluation plans were being demanded for new programs.

Even so, we felt the promise of the assessment movement and its focus on student learning outcomes was not being fulfilled. As Eweil (1997) asserts, nationally these efforts were “attempted piecemeal”—done by a scattering of courses and programs but never systematically across an institution—and that was true at the UW as well. While the piecemeal efforts clearly had an impact on our campus culture, and especially on the cultures of some departments, they
did not result in broad institutional change. We understood that higher education moves at a glacial pace, and we also knew intimately that the extended period of diminishing or certainly not expanding resources was taking its toll.

Nonetheless, we asked ourselves what was lacking. Why were we feeling dissatisfied? Our belief in the importance of careful assessment of student learning as driving instructional and curricular decision-making remained unshaken. Admittedly, this dissatisfaction partly came from the fact that the impact of assessment is so often indirect and mingled with many other forces for change. This disappointment was felt nationwide, and it, in part, launched the scholarship of teaching movement in the assessment field.

Most troubling, perhaps, was that we saw that faculty in two- and four-year institutions, whose enthusiasm about assessment had thrust them into campus leadership positions, were experiencing burnout from hard work with little reward. Many were dropping out of assessment work and were not being replaced in equal numbers by new faculty. Pullan (1997) illuminates this problem among those engaged in educational reform, arguing that “a deepening malaise among educators” has been caused, at least in part, by the fact that none of the efforts for reform has resulted in major change and that emotion and hope had been “either ignored or miscast” in reform efforts. At the same time, Ewell (1997) speaks about the failure of the assessment movement to bring about educational reform. The national story told by Lazerson, Wegener, and Shumanis (2000) describes a similarly disappointing path, which captured our local experience almost perfectly.

Here in Seattle in 1999, after 10 years of state funding for assessment, we felt it was time to regroup. Luckily for our institution, we had some Carnegie fellows among our faculty who were spreading the word about the scholarship of teaching and learning. We had an active Center for Instructional Development and Research, as well as discipline-based instructional centers such as the Center for Engineering Learning and Teaching and the Physics Education Group. We also were working with other baccalaureate-granting public institutions in the state on interesting writing and information literacy assessment projects. From our perspective, however, it seemed clear that the move to accountability had in some ways limited what assessment could be and do on our campus.

We also wondered how the structure of university undergraduate education limited the way in which assessment must operate within that structure. One might think of a university as a large supermarket, in which the cereal section is the political science department and the coffee section is comparative literature. On the left are fresh fruit and vegetables (engineering) and on the right are dairy products (biology). Each student moves through, choosing certain cereals and vegetables (courses), and at the time of graduation, a checker records the various bar codes associated with what is in the grocery cart and determines whether the right assortment exists for the student to leave the store—in other words, to graduate. The bill has been paid in advance, and the student attains alumni status and goes on her way. Of course, we hope that through the course of four or more years that the student has moved from selecting Sugar Corn Pops to choosing low-fat, organic granola, and from iceberg lettuce to Belgian endive.

This analogy may be a reach, and we do not in any way wish to imply that we view the student as a consumer of higher education, nor do we want to suggest that curriculum planning does not occur. Our point is that a college education tends to be thought of as a linear series of loosely related events—mainly classes—and this view does not adequately recognize how students really learn. Departmental curricula are structured to lead the student through a logical progression of learning, but not much attention has been paid to how students progress through that curriculum.

Talking to students makes it clear that learning does not proceed in a wholly linear fashion, and it does not all take place within classes, as most scholars, most faculty members, the majority of parents, and all students know. Rather, learning is iterative. We learn; we forget. We learn a second time, perhaps from a different orientation, perhaps emphasizing a different facet. We learn from other students, sometimes in the class, sometimes in a discussion or argument outside class, maybe even over a beer. Sometimes concepts are learned from textbooks, but sometimes they are cemented on bus trips. Some learning—such as early learning in math—is sequential. Other kinds of learning—such as learning to become a skilled writer or painter—are not as much sequential processes as they are deepening processes, where students’ understanding of key concepts becomes richer, physical, and multifaceted. Most of the time, our institutions of higher education pay more attention to the basket full of groceries, to an analysis of what is in the cart and what should be, rather than to the human being pushing the cart. If the focus is on the cart, we will never see how the choices that an individual made were affected by other choices, by world events, and by total transformations resulting from a pause beside the cauliflower display. If the focus is on the cart, we miss Jeremy Nolan’s moment on Tinjil Island when monkeys were accompanying him along a jungle path and Kate McDonald’s reasons for leaving the UW, as well as her reasons for coming back.

We wanted to be able to walk with students like Jeremy and Kate in order to assess student learning on our campus. In large part, our own history in assessment and the movement to accountability in our state and in the nation led us to design a longitudinal study of undergraduate learning.
Personal Reasons for the Study

In addition to the grand backdrops for a study such as the UW SOUL, we each had our own smaller reasons for wanting to follow a large sample of students through college. As director of the UW’s Office of Educational Assessment between 1980 and 2001, Gillmore participated in all phases of the assessment movement in higher education since its inception. In his years as the assessment coordinator for the UW campus, he implemented a program to survey entering students, seniors, and graduates of the UW one year, five years, and 10 years after graduation. He sat on faculty committees to design research on writing and quantitative reasoning, and he was often the one who conducted this research. He worked with departments to design studies to assess the extent to which students were meeting their outcomes.

Looking back, there was one compelling problem with all of this experience. All of his research had been cross-sectional and aggregated. Gillmore felt that he had missed individual students and their particular paths. Long before, he had dreams of convening annual panels of students who would respond to surveys on matters of contemporary campus interest. This idea slowly expanded into the desire to do a deep study of the learning and development of the members of a cohort. Gillmore continues to see validity and generalization as hallmarks of worthy research. Nonetheless, this study served as a welcomed opportunity to take a much closer look at the trees that make up the forest of a college education.

Beyer came to the study with many desires. She wanted to hear what students’ experiences were in their own words. Disturbed by unfair casual sampling, she created a national survey for the first time. Beyer wanted to ask questions and listen to answers from a large number of students. Also, as a faculty member in the Interdisciplinary Writing Program for many years, she had taught writing courses that were linked with courses for the first time. The observed changes in the quality of the faculty members’ teaching had been incorporated into their teaching over time. Through her observations and conversations about teaching with faculty across the curriculum, she learned that even at an institution as large as the UW, faculty cared deeply about their teaching and worked, sometimes heroically, to be good at it. Therefore, another motivating desire for Beyer was to have the opportunity to learn how to improve instruction. While there is a wealth of information available to faculty on how to improve instruction, Beyer wanted to start with what students had to say.

Finally, Beyer’s experience suggested that what Maki (2002) described as “institutional curiosity” about learning had been building at the UW, manifesting itself in many departments and programs across campus. In Maki’s words:

Institutional curiosity seeks answers to questions about which students learn, what they learn, how well they learn, when they learn, and explores how pedagogies and educational experiences foster student learning. When institutional curiosity drives assessment, faculty and professional staff across the institution raise these kinds of questions and jointly seek answers to them, based on the understanding that students’ learning and development occur over time both inside and outside the classroom. (p. 8)

Beyer wanted, therefore, to create a study that would include institutional input and tell an institutional story about undergraduate learning.

Unlike Gillmore and Beyer, Fisher came to the study “haphazardly”—his word. In his final year of undergraduate work, he felt a vague need for an internship experience. As a comparative history of ideas major, his studies focused on issues in pedagogy and critical theory, and his continual interest was exploring how the self is engaged in and influences thinking. In his senior thesis, he developed a notion of critical thinking as an ongoing, personal investigation, so it was only fitting that his quest for an internship experience landed him at the UW SOUL in the area of critical thinking and problem solving. Interestingly, his analysis of the critical thinking and problem-solving data provided a compelling answer to a tension he struggled with in his thesis: intellectually, he believed in his own conception of critical thinking, yet he suspected it was all wrong. However, overcoming his own intellectual bias was extremely difficult. The process only began because he listened to students’ descriptions of their critical thinking and problem-solving experiences, the disciplines resisted abstraction, and could not be ignored. The answer was essentially quite simple: generic models of critical thinking, including his own, are misleading. After Fisher’s transformation during his analysis of critical thinking and problem solving comments, he became a passionate advocate for listening, for vigilance about one’s own biases and theories during both design and analysis stages of the study, and for the role of the researcher as a learner. These perspectives made him an excellent mentor for the undergraduates who worked on the study.

These personal paths led us to design this longitudinal study of student learning based on students’ own written and spoken descriptions of that learning, as well as on systematic surveying and on looking at actual student products from their courses. We were able to do in this study what most educators would love to do, had they the time: watch a fairly large number of students traverse the entire university. In doing this, we learned a great deal, and the goal of this book is to pass on what we have learned.
Study Design

As a result of these three streams of influence—the literature on development, the progress of assessment, and our own personal paths—we designed the UW SOUL to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information about and to assess the undergraduate program at the UW. The study was exploratory and discovery-based, rather than hypothesis-driven, although it was focused around our identified aims and priorities. We were interested in casting a big net and seeing what we might find, in discerning nuances in students’ learning processes and practices, and in gathering information that might generate “small-e” theories that would be useful to others doing assessment work. As Merriam (1998) stated, however, no qualitative study is theory-free, because some coherent set of ideas frames the questions being asked. This statement is clearly true of qualitative and mixed method studies, too. As stated previously, social constructivist theory broadly framed our study, and we were particularly guided by Arnett’s (2000) theory of emerging adulthood. As we analyzed data, our findings led us to theories of learning that focus on the ways disciplines shape knowledge and knowledge acquisition (Bazerman, 2000; Biglan, 1973; Donald, 2002; Wineburg, 1991).

Given our broad goals, in designing this study, we felt we needed to make use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, hoping that the findings of each method would enrich rather than contradict the other. Our study has made greater use of qualitative methods for the following reasons:

[Qualitative research] is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions therein. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily but to understand the nature of that setting—what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting—and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting... The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (Patton, 1985, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 6)

We describe our research methods in more detail in Chapter 2.

Central Argument

Our findings led us to understand that at the UW, and we believe at most institutions, the academic disciplines shape students’ educational experience in every way. What students learn about diversity, critical thinking, writing, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and technology—including how these terms are defined—is mediated by the disciplines, as are the best pedagogical strategies to teach students these skills.

This mediation is not only true for students’ third and fourth years in college, as many people might assume, but for the first two years as well. Therefore, the “fact” of general education, in the sense of it being a shared experience by all or nearly all students, is largely a myth (Gillmore, 2003), particularly for institutions, such as ours, that have what Aslin (1993a) calls a “distributional” model of general education. A student taking a 100-level history course in her first quarter will be expected to write papers that a historian would recognize as thoughtful, well supported, and clear, whether or not the student has ever written a history paper before or has received any instruction in how to write such a paper in any history course. The same is true for first-year chemistry labs. In other words, faculty teaching these courses use the standards and practices of their disciplines in their work with these students, just as they do in their work with juniors and seniors. Furthermore, faculty teaching these freshmen and sophomore level courses have been immersed so fully and for so long in the practices, purposes, frameworks, and research of those disciplines that they are often unable to step outside those perspectives to explain them—even if they wish to, even if they believe they ought to.

We have learned, and we argue here, that there is no such thing as an undergraduate education; instead, we have many undergraduate educations filtered through the lenses of particular disciplines—a reality also noted by Pike (2004) in speaking about student engagement. For this reason, generic approaches to assessment or approaches that attempt to measure learning at the institutional level are doomed to capture little information that matters about students or their learning. Therefore, when we think about improving undergraduate education or increasing learning, even in broad areas (for example, writing, critical thinking, information technology and literacy, and quantitative reasoning chosen for assessment by the State of Washington), we need to keep our focus on majors and disciplines, as a necessary first step in assessing the undergraduate curriculum. Departments define learning, and departments should measure it for their majors.

This argument comes at an interesting time in our country’s educational policy history. Our book does not address no-child-left-behind testing currently
underway in K–12 institutions across the country. However, we believe that our findings bolster the positions of K–12 educators and researchers who argue that high-stakes standardized testing cannot measure student learning. In contrast, our book is a direct challenge to arguments in a recent *New York Times* article (Arenson, 2006), put forward by the Spellings Commission on Higher Education, that standardized testing such as that underway in K–12 should be extended to students in higher education. We argue, here, that such testing could never accurately measure student learning, and our evidence supports our earlier state study on the use of standardized tests to assess learning (Washington Council of Presidents and State Board for Community College Education, 1989). Standardized assessment approaches would require a huge investment in time, money, and energy—just as the K–12 experiment has required—and, because they could not capture the unique learning students acquire from the disciplines of their majors, standardized tests would reveal nothing about student learning that faculty and departments could use to improve their work.

While the information we collected and analyzed strongly shows the central role of disciplines in college students’ growth as learners, a second argument underlies every chapter in the book. That argument is that self-reflection is a mode of learning. Bransford et al. (2000) speak eloquently of the contribution of metacognition to students’ learning, and the importance of self-reflection and assessment to successful work performance has been a subject of research. Yet one might ask where students learn how to assess their own performances accurately. Self-assessment is rarely built into courses at large public research institutions such as our own; we rarely ask students to speak or write about their learning and almost never deliberately teach them to assess their own progress. Instead, most of us who teach, hope that students will pick up ways to look critically at their learning and thinking by paying attention to how we look at it, putting our faith in modeling as a way of instruction, in osmosis—a through-the-skin transmission of how to evaluate one’s own ideas. This approach is decidedly different from that at Alverno College, the premier assessment institution in the U.S., which makes teaching students to be effective at self-assessment a deliberate part of its work.

In talking with students over the four years of the UW SOUL, we have learned that there are big payoffs for students and for institutions in asking students what they hope to learn, what they actually learned, and how what they learned did or did not change them. We believe that these payoffs are evident in many of the quotations we include in each chapter and in every case study we include. In addition, we speak more directly of what students perceive as the benefits of such reflection and institutional benefits in the last chapter of the book.

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**Organization**

This book’s purpose is to share with faculty, staff, administrators, parents, and students involved in higher education what we learned about students’ learning from UW undergraduates.

To achieve this purpose and to mine the richness of the information that the study has yielded, we present the data in several ways, including ways that blur distinctions among individual students’ paths. However, we try not to stray too far from actual student voices. For this reason, we include many student quotations throughout the book, and we begin each chapter with one or more extended case studies that illustrate aspects of the learning we discuss in the chapter. Even so, many of the case studies that we present spill over the containers of their chapters. We believe that this spillover effect is important, because it accurately represents our experience in talking with students. Learning happened messily rather than in the neat packages we set out to examine, and students always reported more than we could capture.

The rest of the book is divided into the following chapters:

- Chapter 2, "Research Process," provides an overview of the UW SOULs research questions and methodology, as well as a description of the study’s sample and its representativeness.
- Chapter 3, "Personal Growth," presents results that focus broadly on students’ academic and personal experience. It considers students’ comments on how they changed as they moved through their university experience, and what they felt contributed to those changes.
- Chapter 4, "Understanding and Appreciating Diversity," gives students’ responses to questions on diversity that show students’ attitudes toward diversity and associated behavior when they entered UW and how those attitudes and behavior changed over time.
- Chapter 5, "Critical Thinking and Problem Solving," argues that students’ descriptions of critical thinking and problem solving support the idea that critical thinking is "domain-specific" (the phrase of Sam Wineburg at Stanford), and it reports critical thinking challenges in seven broad disciplinary categories. Chapter 5 also includes faculty descriptions of critical thinking in their fields.
- Chapter 6, "Writing," closely paralleling Chapter 5, tracks what students said about their writing experience over time. It includes information about how much writing students did at the UW and where
they did that writing, as well as descriptions of the writing that students considered their most challenging. In addition, the chapter discusses the gap between writing in high school and writing in college.

- Chapter 7, "Quantitative Reasoning," describes the kinds of quantitative reasoning tasks students found challenging, as well as providing comments from faculty on the kinds of quantitative reasoning necessary to do the work of their disciplines. This chapter illuminates the ways that disciplines are or are not infused with quantitative tasks.

- Chapter 8, "Information Technology and Literacy" shows that the way students gathered and used information technologies varied radically across disciplines, making institutional assessment of information technology and literacy challenging. This chapter also includes results of an interview study with faculty on how they define research—another word for "finding and using information."

- In Chapter 9, "General Learning," students note what helped and hindered their learning while in college. Their comments on what faculty can do to communicate they care about student learning and on what advances their own learning confirm research on how people learn.

- Chapter 10, "Summary and Last Words," focuses on the effects of the study on student learning, pulls together our conclusions and recommendations, and provides follow-up information on the student case study included in this introduction—Jeremy Nolan.

Guiding Principle
In conducting this study and analyzing its results, our guiding principle has been to respect the students’ words, always letting those words generate whatever categories we were sorting them into while recognizing the individual voices among them. Our guiding principle was always to focus on what the students said. With this in mind, combined with the fact that much of this book describes students in the aggregate, we feel that it is important to note that after reading and listening to thousands of statements from UW SOUL participants, we learned that there is no "general" UW story. Each student’s path was as unique as Jeremy Nolan’s and Kate McDonald’s, and this is surely true of students at any other college, as well. This book cannot recreate those paths, but we hope that it gives the reader a sense of both their sameness and their variety.

Endnotes
1) Quotations that begin these chapters come from the interviews and email of student participants in the UW SOUL (except in Chapter 4).
2) We tracked students until they left the study, left the UW, graduated, or reached the end of the fourth year in college. See Chapter 2 for further information on the study population.
3) All students’ names have been changed.
4) See www.gesis.ucla.edu/hest/cirp_survey.html for information on CIRP and the survey.
5) See http://depts.washington.edu/engl/w/wp/ for information on the UW’s Interdisciplinary Writing Program.
6) When we speak of “disciplines” in this book, we include interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary majors as disciplines. We believe that most of these programs, such as the UW’s Women Studies Department or the Program on the Environment, operate in many of the same ways that disciplines operate. They have agreed-upon values and pedagogical approaches, and they also often have learning goals for students, which can serve as criteria for assessing student learning. Also, as do traditional academic disciplines, they have connections with other inter- and transdisciplinary programs like themselves across the country, publish in their own academic journals, and participate in national conferences in their fields. In contrast to traditional disciplines, inter- and transdisciplinary majors embrace a wide range of methodologies, as well as a broad range of questions, which means that assessment can be more challenging in these departments than it is for the traditional areas. Furthermore, faculty in inter- and transdisciplinary majors usually come from traditional disciplines, which complicates assessment of students who are asked to demonstrate more integrated kinds of thinking using a broader range of tools than those assessing them have learned. While there are crucial and interesting differences between inter/transdisciplinary majors and majors in the traditional academic disciplines, we believe that the similarities are such that we include the inter/transdisciplinary majors as disciplines when we say that learning is a disciplinary act.
7) Quotations have been shortened and slightly edited in some cases. When edited, distancing phrases, such as “you know” and “like” were often removed. However, for the most part, quotations are exactly as students spoke or wrote them.
Higher Education
and the American Dream
Success and its Discontents

Marvin Lazerson

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Has a lot of rhetoric been expended on a potential revolution in teaching and learning? Yes. Have public policies emerged to require or invite improved student learning? Yes. Are numerous teaching innovations being undertaken? Some. What initiated and sustains these activities? Probably external pressures and a few people in higher education devoted to the improvement of teaching. With all this activity, why should we be so agnostic about a teaching and learning revolution? Because there are few serious incentives to improve the quality of learning and because improving the quality of learning is exceedingly difficult. There are no silver bullets!

Let's face it, there is no large-scale, serious movement to improve the quality of teaching in higher education. The claims that new technology is dramatically altering the way students learn and the ways professors teach are overstated, a cross between naïve and self-serving. If you believe them, there are a lot of other things I would like to sell you. There are, nonetheless, tremendous concerns about the quality of what students are learning, the ‘value-added’ by colleges or universities to what students already know. With conflicts erupting over how high tuition should be in the context of universities and colleges needing more money and students (and their families) angry at costs, issues of value-added and knowledge gained are on the table. Something is happening; we just do not know exactly what the something is.

Rumblings about the quality of teaching and learning began as a sidebar to the economic difficulties and caustic criticisms of higher education during the 1980s. Critics saw higher education as a poorly run industry, fiscally irresponsible and managerially inefficient, and they focused on organizational restructuring and ways to constrain expenses. In the jargon of the day, well-run organizations require efficient structures, strong leadership, and cost containment. Teach-

* A prior version was co-authored with Ursula Wagener and Nichole Shumanis.
ing and learning should also be measured along these lines, and when
the critics looked, they discovered that college students learned too
little, that professors taught very few hours per week, that students
were leaving college before completing their degrees, and even when
they did graduate, they were ill-equipped for the labor market.

The worries about teaching and learning in the early 1980s began
as afterthoughts, which grew as complaints about higher education
increased. Public officials picked them up and called upon profes­sors to teach more often and more efficiently. Officials suggested
that the public had a right to see evidence that students were learn­ing and that public accountability included educational outcomes,
as well as the standard reports to accrediting agencies and to aud­iting and accounting firms. On campuses, conversations turned to
teaching and curricular innovations. Some schools tampered with
their general education offerings, revising required and elective
courses; many increased the number of course offerings and devel­oped interdisciplinary majors as ways to make learning more invit­ing and attractive. Greater expenditures on technology to support
teaching and learning occurred. A few schools, especially in the
health professions, introduced competency-based learning to test
how competent students were at using their knowledge. Teaching
and writing centers were established, designed to help professors
and graduate students become better teachers and aid students in
preparing papers. Learning communities started to become popular,
especially at residential schools where faculty and students could
spend more time together, but also within a few community col­leges. These efforts were attempts to rebalance the conversation
about what matters in higher education by adding teaching and
learning to the organizational restructuring, managerial changes,
and cost-cutting that was coming to dominate reform. As a conse­quence, how professors taught and how much students learned
became part of the public dialogue over higher education.

National reports by higher education organizations were one
forum for stimulating interest in teaching and learning, and criticiz­ing curricular content, teaching practices, learning outcomes, and
insufficient student involvement in their learning. The rhetoric was
lofty—“value-added,” “collaborative and cooperative learning,”
“classroom assessment,” and “teaching as scholarship.” Studies of
the brain helped educators to better understand cognitive processes.
For one of the first times in American higher education history,
attention focused not only on “what is taught,” but “how it is taught,”
“what students learn,” and “how they learn it.” Given the height­ened attention to organizational change, the national conver­sation about teaching and learning that ensued raised questions about
the mechanisms of change. Given the organization of higher education,
how could reforms be implemented?

Many of the initial answers came from outside higher education:
change had to be imposed by public bodies through a punish­ment­and-reward system activated through the assessment of learning
outcomes. From within higher education the answer was quite dif­ferent: professorial participation in shaping and implementing cur­ricular and pedagogical change depended upon faculty buy-in. Fac­ulty as a collective—as opposed to individual faculty members—
had to be persuaded to take teaching and student learning seriously.
To bring about this change, higher education’s value and reward
system would need modifications, including the elevation of teach­ing’s status and a new understanding of teaching as a researchable,
valued, and rewarded scholarly activity. This violated the prevail­ing norms that scholarship was more highly valued than teaching
and that teaching was an individual faculty member’s responsibility
protected by academic freedom. Public demands for accountability
had to be balanced, if not held in abeyance, by the sanctity of high­er education’s autonomy.

These conflicting presumptions—the public’s demand for docu­mented measures of accountability versus higher education’s belief
that its vitality depended upon maintaining its autonomy—shaped
and constrained the teaching and learning revolution. Within those
constraints, some within higher education engaged (and continue to
engage) in vigorous efforts to encourage professors to take learning
seriously, even as resistance to change remains high. The task was
made even more difficult, because how to produce good learning is
itself highly complex; even with the best of intentions, outcomes
are always uncertain.
6.1 American education at risk

The teaching and learning reform movement took shape in the 1980s as the U.S. economy stumbled and a wave of criticism overtook elementary and secondary education. The triggering event was the Reagan administration's National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (1983). In bold and frightening language, the Commission charged Americans with committing economic and national security suicide by failing to uphold academic standards in their schools. The curriculum, the Commission believed, had been watered down—"dumbed down" was the commonly used phrase—teachers were ill-trained, and money was being spent wastefully. Students knew little mathematics or science, read poorly, and wrote even worse. It was long past the time when public officials could ignore the nation's educational deficiencies.

*A Nation at Risk* initiated a national catharsis. State after state in the 1980s and early 1990s passed legislation increasing the requirements for high school graduation and demanding statewide standardized testing. The Reagan and Bush administrations of the 1980s and early 1990s, hardly proponents of increased federal intervention, introduced a national report card on how students were doing based on a series of standardized tests taken by elementary and high school students, while simultaneously opening debate about the creation of national academic achievement standards. States quickly joined in, legislating more rigorous high school graduation requirements, standardized learning assessment, and establishing minimum learning standards review committees in a variety of subjects. Mandates for more comprehensive teacher assessment led to the creation of new organizations or invigorated interest from existing organizations to hold teachers to higher academic standards. Educational outcomes—what students actually knew—took on greater importance, with the debate centering on how to determine what they should know and how to implement measures to make more learning happen. The movement to improve the quality of elementary and secondary learning was given still further impetus when the results of international achievement tests showed American students to be behind their counterparts around the world (Elmore and Fuhrman, 1990).

By the early 1990s, the charges that America's public schools were malfunctioning had stimulated a host of efforts, some contradictory, to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The tension between accountability measures, largely driven by those outside the educational system, and the attempts within schools to reconceptualize the environments for students' learning—by, for example, introducing smaller classes—was often palpable. Demands for higher academic standards and more standardized testing of outcomes, a more rigorous curriculum, better teacher training, portfolios that assessed student learning, the reorganization of school districts and individual schools into smaller entities, the creation of charter schools, greater parental choice, and increased parental involvement in their children's education, all competed with one another. At the same time, a new mantra of learning, based in part upon research into how children learn, told educators to make schools more "learner-centered." Translated, this seemed to mean some combination of holding all students to higher academic standards, emphasizing active learning and student engagement, making schoolwork relevant to students, and individualizing instruction.

Inescapably, criticisms of elementary and secondary schooling spilled over into higher education. One source came from the corporate sector. During the early 1980s, with a national economy in the doldrums and seemingly being overwhelmed by Asia's boom, corporate leaders undertook massive restructuring of their operations. They quickly conceived of higher education's problems in the same terms, as ones of organizational inefficiencies, weak governance and decision-making structures, poor leadership, and excessive costs of operation artificially hidden by rapidly rising tuition charges. Politicians weighed in, painting higher education with the same "tax and spend" brush that so successfully spearheaded Republican political triumphs. Public colleges and universities were like other public agencies—overly subsidized and protected by government from the rigors of marketplace competition. Professors became another version of federal bureaucrats, in the language of the day, simply putting in their time without being held to clear measures of accountability. Angrily, critics charged that professors taught too few students for too few hours with too little interest. Academic leaders were denounced as weak and obstructionist, unwilling or
unable to make forceful decisions in a timely fashion. As Harvard's president, Derek Bok, noted in the mid-1980s, "Governors and other public figures are openly wondering just what results are being obtained in exchange for the billions spent on higher education" (Bok, 1986).

The attacks were vitriolic, the kind of anger that comes from trust betrayed. The higher education system that had grown so fast and become so powerful had badly stumbled and was in urgent need of repair. In what became the standard litany of the 1980s, Chester Finn, Jr., a former official in the U.S. Department of Education, issued an indictment of colleges and universities for admitting unqualified students, coddling them, and resisting genuine assessments of student learning. Explicitly tying his critique to the emergent criticism of America's public schools, Finn charged that "American colleges and universities have thus far largely escaped the intense scrutiny to which our elementary and secondary schools have been subjected. This reprieve should not, however, be taken as proof that higher education has somehow eluded the qualitative decay that has weakened the schools" (Finn, 1984).

Voices from corporate America reinforced these views. With corporate leaders assuming greater influence on state boards of higher education and boards of trustees, attention centered on organizational and economic failings, with business leaders faulting colleges and universities for not adopting the principles of corporate America—cutting costs, re-engineering and restructuring business operations, and demanding more efficient and more productive workers—and for not having a genuine 'bottom line.' In contrast to the world of business, colleges and universities lacked serious mechanisms of accountability. Indeed, in order to counter this notion that higher education lacked accountability, higher education began to refer to student learning as its bottom line. Public officials quickly acknowledged that this might be the case, and then turned back to higher education to demand proof that it was in fact producing results. As Governor John Ashcroft of Missouri, chair of the National Governors' Association Task Force on College Quality, wrote, "The public has the right to know what it is getting for its expenditure of tax resources; the public has a right to know and understand the quality of undergraduate education that young people receive from publicly funded colleges and universities. They have a right to know that their resources are being wisely invested and committed" (National Governors' Association, 1986).

6.2 Learning, assessment, and accountability

The view that higher education was in deep need of reform found expression in a host of national reports through the 1980s, from the National Institute of Education (1984), the National Endowment for the Humanities (Bennett, 1984), the Association of American Colleges (1985), and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Newman, 1985). Perhaps the report with the greatest public policy impact, the National Governors' Association's Time for Results appeared in 1986. Chaired by three of the country's most prominent governors—Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, future president Bill Clinton of Arkansas, and Thomas Kean of New Jersey—Time for Results painted a broad canvas of what was needed for states to improve the condition of elementary, secondary, and collegiate education. To the governors the need for reform was self-evident: economic productivity required a better-educated workforce.

The Governors' Association Task Force on College Quality concentrated on learning, or more accurately, as the task force's chair wrote, on the lack of "a systematic way to demonstrate whether student learning is taking place." For the governors, the central learning issue was assessment: "The Task Force on College Quality decided to focus on how colleges and universities can demonstrate that student learning is occurring. In addition to investigating how colleges and universities can assess student learning, the task force also studied data on how student outcomes can be used to assess the effectiveness of academic programs, curriculums, and institutions" (National Governors' Association, 1986, pp. 20-21, 154-165).

The report highlighted the dominant theme in the public's perception of what was needed to improve higher education—stronger measures of accountability. Public assessment of student learning was especially important because it would hold colleges and universities accountable in their primary business, teaching and learn-
Assessment of student learning was a way to account for the large expenditures of public funds given to higher education, a way to justify the powerful influence colleges and universities had in awarding status to individuals, and, for some, a way to reverse the public's loss of confidence in higher education. In this sense, the assessment of learning paralleled the bottom line in business, a way to account for the investments and a mechanism to improve return on investment.

Assessment as public policy grew swiftly. Almost no state in the early 1980s required institutions of higher education to assess their students’ learning beyond the usual fare of course examinations and papers. By the end of the decade more than 40 states had taken action designed to get public universities and colleges to assess learning outcomes, and all six regional accrediting associations included outcomes assessment in their criteria for accreditation of both public and private institutions. Assessment of student learning, Patricia Hutchings and Theodore Marchese of the American Association of Higher Education concluded in 1990, was becoming “a condition of doing business” (Hutchings and Marchese, 1990).

Actual state assessment policies varied, from those that mandated statewide testing of students (e.g., Florida) to those that sought to encourage institutional reporting on a variety of indicators of effectiveness as part of a general review process (Aper and Hinkle, 1991). Most states opted to require institutions to develop their own local assessment procedures consistent with their missions and student consumers. Such an approach was intended to acknowledge institutional autonomy and to allay schools’ fears of inter-institutional comparisons. At the same time, set-aside funds were made available to institutions in the form of grant-like incentive pools to encourage instructional innovation consistent with assessment.

At the federal level, the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education (FIPSE), which had historically been at the center of efforts at innovation, turned its support to the development of campus assessment programs. The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) responded to the continued expansion of state assessment efforts by promulgating guiding principles regarding assessment policies, including focusing on the effectiveness of academic programs and the improvement of student learning and performance, calling upon states to use incentives rather than regulations or penalties, and to develop such incentives collaboratively with faculty.

Fairly early on then, the broad shape of the assessment movement was set. States pressed colleges and universities to take the assessment of learning seriously and to use the outcomes data to reshape their curriculum and to alter teaching in order to improve what and how much students learned. Higher education organizations, like NASULGC, urged states to provide incentives for institutions to use learning assessment as a mechanism of change and urged campuses to “own” assessment as a way to improve academic programs and increase student learning—and not incidentally, to protect institutional autonomy. On one level, then, Hutchings and Marchese were right: by the 1990s the assessment movement was making major inroads into higher education and was playing an important role in prodding colleges and universities to talk about student learning.

However, that was only part of the story. Faculty tended to view assessment as externally imposed and having little to do with their business of research and teaching, as well as being sensitive to the political and economic uses that state-imposed assessments could be put. Assessment also seemed yet another reporting requirement in a growing list of such requirements, and faculty responded negatively to the intrusiveness of the demands. With few incentives to cooperate, at least as perceived by faculty, professors showed little enthusiasm for being held responsible for student learning. The traditional norm was that professors brought knowledge to the classroom and taught it; college students chose to learn it or not. Post-secondary education, after all, was optional, not compelled. That norm among faculty was not easily overturned (Ewell, 1999; Banta and Associates, 1993).

Multiple problems existed. One involved the conflicting messages, those being sent by the externally driven assessment movement and those being received by institutions. Because the assessment movement emerged out of the cascade of criticism about higher education, it became inseparable from efforts to hold colleges and universities accountable and often seemed more about accountability and power than about improving the quality of learning.
Even those faculty genuinely interested in improving student learning found themselves fighting against a perception that doing so would be to capitulate to the bullying tactics that threatened higher education's autonomy. Public bodies found the organizational complexities of colleges and universities confusing and frustrating. Meanwhile political and corporate leaders had little patience for inaction. Most higher education institutions had little experience in collective decision-making and even less in having to make and implement decisions quickly. Despite the rhetoric of shared governance and faculty responsibility for an institution's success, most higher education institutions were collections of schools and departments that functioned fairly autonomously from one another, often viewing each other as involved in a zero sum gain, where one department's gains were perceived as losses elsewhere. With the bulk of the faculty holding tenure, there existed few mechanisms to require change. The traditional pattern of leaving decisions about teaching and curriculum to individual faculty members and departments remained in place. It was hard to hold a meaningful conversation or to agree on new rules of the game in such circumstances.

There were also serious and almost totally unaddressed questions about the relationships between assessments of learning and changes in academic programs and teaching. What did it mean to instructors when they were told that their students were not performing well on writing or historical knowledge? There were the dilemmas of measurement itself as well. Faculty rightly asked such questions as: “What do we want to know?” “Why do we want to know it?” “How should we measure it?” “What will we do with the answers?” Such questions were both defensive reactions to external pressures—ways of setting up shields until the political clamor died down—and genuine attempts to comprehend what was worth doing and how.

By the end of the 1990s, it had become obvious that state-mandated assessments had not altered undergraduate education; public officials consequently lost patience with the slow pace of change and the occasional outright resistance of some (often prominent) institutions to the assessment agenda (Ewell, 1999). They became frustrated with the difficulties in getting clear measures of what students were learning and the difficulties in comparing data across institutions when assessment measures were being created institution by institution, thus making it exceedingly difficult to use the information to make budgetary and funding allocation decisions. With change barely noticeable, state legislatures and state boards of higher education shifted from the view that colleges and universities should set the terms of campus-based assessments, thereby giving substantial freedom to institutions and complicating inter-institutional comparisons, and started to demand more standardized and more easily measured indicators of performance: enrollment and graduation rates; degree completion and time to degree; persistence and retention rates; remediation activities and indicators of their effectiveness; transfer rates to and from two- and four-year institutions; pass rates on professional exams; job placement data on graduates and graduates’ satisfaction with their jobs; and faculty workload and productivity in the form of student-faculty ratios and instructional contact hours (Burke and Serban, 1998a, 1998b).

The shift to performance outcomes and common indicators that could be more easily obtained, more easily quantified, and more easily compared attested to the complexities involved in measuring learning, and were simpler ways public agencies could make comparative analyses for budgetary allocations. These kinds of measurable outcomes could be viewed as alternative ways of assessing teaching and learning. Graduation rates, amounts of remediation, degree completion time, job placement, and faculty workload could serve as surrogates for direct measures of learning. And such data could be gotten from more compliant college and university administrators without excessive dependence on faculty buy-in. In short order, efforts shifted from state mandates that institutions create campus-based assessments to the creation of state-required performance-funding and performance-budgeting. The former tied state funds directly to public college and university achievement of designated indicators; the latter took a laundry list of indicators into consideration in determining higher education budgets.

The movement toward common indicators tied to institutional and system-wide performance outcomes achieved robust growth. In 1998 half the states were using some form of performance indicators in their budgetary allotments to institutions and statewide systems, including Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois,
Indiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. The Rockefeller Institute of Government projected that even more states were likely to move in that direction in the next five years (Burke and Serban, 1998[a]). Although most performance-based budgeting policies affected less than 5% of the higher education budgets—sometimes available as new money offered as incentives—the policies were explicitly aimed to get institutions to change the ways they did business. In Tennessee, the first state to implement performance-budgeting, roughly 5% of the state’s budget for higher education was earmarked for incentive bonuses for institutions that met or exceeded state-determined and institutionally-defined goals, such as improved student performance on various tests and student and alumni satisfaction with their education. South Carolina’s General Assembly passed a more ambitious financing system in 1996, in which the amount of money that each public college received from the state depended entirely on its progress in meeting a list of goals (Schmidt, 1996).

As the 21st century began, the assessment movement was both flourishing and in shambles. As an externally driven phenomenon, the movement had forced student learning onto higher education’s agenda. A survey of chief academic officers at almost 1,400 public and private institutions showed that the overwhelming majority—between 74 percent and 96 percent depending on the measure—reported collecting student assessment data, including progress to degree, basic college readiness skills, academic intentions, and student satisfaction with their undergraduate experience. But beneath the movement’s rapid implementation were some jolting revelations. Only around a third of the institutions assessed students’ higher order learning skills, affective development, or professional skills. The use of alternative forms of assessment, like the much talked about portfolios, capstone projects, and observations of student performance was infrequent. “Most institutions’ approaches emphasize the use of easily quantifiable indicators of student progress and pay less attention to more complex measures of student development.”

Most powerfully, there was little evidence that any of the institutional assessment measures were being used either to improve institutional approaches to student learning or to make budgetary allocations (National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, 1999).

The assessment movement was neither assessing learning in any direct sense nor was it connecting the findings of the assessments to faculty teaching, evaluations, or rewards. The disjunction between the assessments and faculty behavior remained substantial. To some extent, these failures derived from the externally driven nature of the assessment movement. Campus conversations often became mired down in complaints over assessment’s imposition and its threats to academic integrity rather than on the ways faculty taught and students learned. In contrast to the more hierarchical governance of corporations, higher education institutions had little experience in reaching collective decisions linked to quick implementation. Faculty trained to teach their disciplines showed little interest in assessments that went beyond the norms of course examinations and papers; they rarely possessed much understanding of how to link data from assessments to the ways they taught. Institutional leaders were themselves reluctant to press for concrete linkages between assessment’s findings and faculty classroom activities. Most often, they settled for the collection of data in ways that made their institution look good and help reduce political pressures. For many faculty, a heightened emphasis on teaching and learning seemed to put their commitments to research, and the status attached to research, at risk. While most academic administrators—72% in the survey cited above—reported they strongly supported student assessments, these same administrators identified only 24% of their faculty as being very supportive of student-assessment measures. Interpreting the survey, Ted Marchese, Change’s executive editor and vice president of the American Association for Higher Education, concluded: “the assessment movement, following 15 years of imprecation and mandate, has produced widely observed rituals of compliance on campus, but these have had only minor impacts on the aims of the practice—to improve student learning and public understanding of our contributions to it. To say the least, this is a disappointment” (Marchese, 1999).
6.3 Voices of reform

The assessment movement was a high-profile public campaign to improve the quality of teaching and learning on college and university campuses. Its ambiguous results during the 1980s and 1990s attested to the difficulties of externally imposing changes on the ways institutions, and especially faculty, went about their business. From within higher education itself, however, other attempts to kindle stronger allegiances to the quality of student learning were being undertaken. In particular, a small group of individuals, in many cases linked to national higher education organizations, led a campaign to get colleges and universities to take teaching and student learning seriously. They were joined by faculty and administrators on numerous campuses pressing to reorient and invigorate their schools' commitments to teaching and learning by connecting their goals to institutional missions and academic values.

Aware of how politically difficult change would be, especially at the large research-oriented universities, the learning reformers recognized the need to play the "imperative" card, that external pressures demanded change, while being careful not to provoke further faculty backlash with heavy-handed threats. They understood that professors held fast to the norms of faculty autonomy, the right to pursue the research of their choice and to conduct their classes largely unfettered by bureaucratic constraints or oversight. The reformers appreciated that higher education's value system, even at many self-described "teaching" institutions, placed research at the top of the status hierarchy. It was thus necessary, the reformers believed, to show that teaching could be a scholarly, researchable activity. The reformers recognized that most professors knew little about alternative forms of teaching or ways of assessing their teaching, and that changes in teaching practice were time consuming. The learning reformers understood that their calls to invigorate teaching and learning challenged higher education's institutional culture.

The national and local conversations on the improvement of teaching and learning that emerged were both defensive and proactive, designed simultaneously to blunt the interventions of external agencies and to turn faculty attention toward teaching and learning. The reformers called upon colleges and universities to make teaching and learning legitimate subjects of research and to focus on assessment and research in the classroom. A new language about the scholarship of teaching emerged, along with recommendations to modify a rigid research-oriented promotion system for faculty. Faced with the externally driven assessment and accountability pressures, the reformers contended that highlighting the importance of teaching and learning would protect institutional autonomy from encroachment by external agencies. Acknowledging the highly competitive market for students, they understood that the failure to show substantial interest in student learning undermined an institution's attractiveness to students, with resulting fiscal consequences. Perhaps most poignantly, they valued student learning for its own sake, believing that higher education had been led astray in neglecting it. Six of these higher education reformers achieved particular prominence: Alexander Astin of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA; Derek Bok and Richard Light of Harvard University; Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; K. Patricia Cross of Harvard, UC-Berkeley and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE); and Lee Shulman of Stanford University and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. They were not alone; on numerous campuses, groups of faculty and administrators engaged in battles to reshape faculty and student responsibility toward learning. But these six captured national attention; they were frequently cited and used on campuses to make the case for reform. Their stories illuminate what was happening.

1. Obviously sharp differences exist among colleges and universities in the ways they treat research and teaching. Nonetheless the ethos of research is so powerful that its spillover profoundly affects every level and almost every institution, with the result that efforts to improve teaching and learning have to take the research reward system into account. Since there are very few direct challenges to the research imperative, efforts to improve the quality of learning almost always have to walk gingerly around the research question.
Learning environments: Alexander Astin

In the early and mid-1980s, Alexander Astin, director of the UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, articulated two paths for learning reformers to follow. Having achieved national prominence for his work on student values, most notably through an annual survey of college freshmen that was administered to more than 375,000 students each year at about 700 two- and four-year colleges, Astin’s first path challenged higher education’s ways of measuring educational quality; his second called for a new emphasis on learning environments.

Astin began by claiming that the four traditional standards typically used to measure quality were badly flawed:

- quality as measured by resources (e.g., endowment, external research funding);
- quality as measured by reputation (e.g., faculty prestige, professional attainment of graduates);
- quality as measured by student outcomes (e.g., retention and graduation rates, salaries of graduates); and
- quality as measured by curricular content.

These measures had little to do with the actual accomplishments of colleges in teaching their students. They said nothing about results—how well a college’s students learned what they were taught. A college’s quality, he argued, should instead be measured by the value added to its students’ learning and by the extent to which a college extended the talents of its students. If learning was to be taken seriously, higher education had to factor learning directly into assessments of institutional quality—and by extension, into an institution’s prestige (Astin, 1985a, 1985b).

Astin’s second path more directly attended to learning itself: campuses and classrooms had to be reorganized to engage students if they were actually to learn. Initially in articles and then more widely under the aegis of the National Institute of Education’s Involvement in Learning (1984)—Astin was a member of the panel that drafted the report—he argued that effective learning required high expectations, student involvement in their own learning, and assessment and feedback as a means of furthering learning, themes similarly being articulated by many K-12 educational reformers. Indeed, the idea that schools of all kinds could be reorganized into more powerful learning environments was being supported by an outpouring of research on how people learn (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 1999). The standard methods of teaching—lecturing and discussion sections—it was clear, would not engage students. By the mid-1980s, Astin’s emphasis on student academic outcomes based on assessments of “value-added” as measures of institutional quality and his belief that campuses could be reorganized to focus on learning were being picked up. In 1985, the Association of American Colleges’ Integrity in the College Curriculum (1985) defined educational quality in terms of student learning. Beginning with “the problems”—declining SAT scores; college graduates with serious deficiencies in writing and lacking scientific and technical understanding; a curriculum without depth, breadth, or coherence; and professors who were too specialized and too concerned with research—the report advocated a college curriculum that emphasized modes of inquiry rather than a set of required courses. Colleges should emphasize “how to learn” rather than “what to learn,” phrases congruent with Astin’s views (Wagener, 1989).

Astin’s voice sketched out two of the paths that learning reformers would and continue to travel. The first claimed that as long as measurements of institutional quality and status failed to include an institution’s contribution to student learning, little incentive existed to improve teaching. It simply made no sense to think of institutional quality without thinking about the quality of learning, thereby giving shape to the Quality Assessment movement of the last few decades. The second path contended that learning could not be improved without altering campus and classroom learning environments. The typical format of professors giving information to students and the students dutifully learning it was not going to have any substantial affect on learning, even when it occurred via technology. Both of Astin’s paths had to be followed. Assessments of learning had to be taken into account in reputational rankings of institutional quality and students had to be involved in their own learning if they were to learn. The paths were simultaneously clear and hard to follow.
The Harvard dynamic: Derek Bok and Richard J. Light

Derek Bok, Harvard University's president from 1971 to 1991, who served a short term as acting president in the early 2000s, was an unlikely candidate to push teaching and learning reform. But, like a number of other leaders of higher education in the 1980s, Bok was concerned with the public's anger and bewilderment about skyrocketing tuition and the results of the billions of dollars annually spent on higher education. For higher education's private sector, pressure to reform came from parents, potential students, the media, and a heightened competitive environment, rather than from state legislators and state accountability measures. Responding to these pressures, Bok asked, "What do we really know about the value of a college education? In fact, the evidence we have is at once thin and disturbing... There is little cause for celebration in research findings indicating that the average [college] senior knows only as much as students at the 84th percentile of the freshman class; it is even more disturbing to note other findings that reveal much lower rates of progress in such important activities as critical thinking and expository writing." Adopting Astin's language of value added, and essentially accepting that powerful external pressures demanded that higher education develop a marketplace bottom-line, Bok concluded that universities and colleges had to show that they genuinely added to their students' knowledge. He urged faculty to determine common goals for undergraduate education, to connect those goals to their individual teaching, and to work to help students learn how to learn. While not giving way on the importance of research faculty at research universities, Bok exhorted the higher education community to take teaching and student learning seriously (Bok, 1986), a theme he has continued to take up (Bok, 2007).

Seeking to reshape how college students learned was not a new phenomenon for Harvard, although the voice of reform had been largely absent from national conversations about education since the 1960s. That had not always been the case. In the last decades of the 19th century, Harvard President Charles William Eliot instituted a revolution in higher education by making electives—faculty and student choice in what to teach and to learn—the centerpiece of the university's curriculum. The "house system" of the 1920s at Harvard and Yale ushered in a conception of living and learning that became a continuing motif of educational reformers. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the Harvard faculty's Redbook articulated an approach to undergraduate education that emphasized general education in the interests of creating more knowledgeable and responsible citizens.

Still, Bok's entry into the national debate about teaching and learning was surprising. Even more so was his decision to ask his Harvard colleagues to examine Harvard's learning environment, an examination that Bok himself was undertaking in his annual reports on the quality of the university's various schools. To facilitate the examination, he turned to a statistics professor, Richard Light, who held appointments at both Harvard's Graduate School of Education and the Kennedy School of Government, to oversee a series of seminars with people from within and outside Harvard. Beginning in the fall of 1986, an initial group of 27 Harvard faculty and administrators convened the Harvard Assessment Seminars; over the next four years the group expanded to include more than 100 people drawn from more than two dozen colleges and universities. They sought to "encourage innovation in teaching, in curriculum, in advising, and to evaluate the effectiveness of each innovation." Bok himself expressed his commitment to the enterprise by attending the Seminars' regular monthly meetings for the first six months of their existence.

Working in small groups comprised of faculty, administrators, and students, the Seminars surveyed samples of Harvard College undergraduates and alumni and then issued a nationally disseminated report (Light, 1990). Among the findings: student learning increased when students had immediate feedback on quizzes and assignments and when they were given opportunities for revision. Students learned better in small classes, when they used study groups, and when they shared their written papers with peers ahead of class. Not surprisingly, the findings were congruent with Alexander Astin's views and the National Institute of Education's Involvement in Education (1984). The most often cited teaching tip derived from a suggestion of Seminar participant K. Patricia Cross, that professors should use a "one-minute paper," which asks students to respond to two questions at the end of each class: 1) What is the big point you
learned in class today? and 2) What is the main unanswered question you leave class with today? Each of the questions was designed to foster student learning through active listening and to get students to think of the broad goals of the class rather than the details of any particular topic. As noted below, Cross’ instant replay paper was part of her effort to channel higher education’s assessment movement into classroom practice based on what faculty believed they were trying to accomplish.

The Harvard Assessment Seminars helped advance discussions of teaching and learning among Harvard’s faculty, administrators, students, and alumni, while staying clear of any substantial assessment of Harvard’s teaching practices or student outcome measures, ironically, two of the things Bok had found most important. The impact at Harvard itself is difficult to assess. The most concrete example of impact occurred in Harvard’s Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning, which was renamed in honor of Derek Bok and shifted its traditional almost exclusive focus on graduate student teaching assistants to pay more attention to faculty teaching. Light himself has been unflagging in his commitment to improve learning on college and university campuses (Light, 2001).

The national response to the results of the Harvard Assessment Seminars was substantial and immediate—Light called it “astonishing”—for they hit the higher education community at precisely the moment when teaching and learning were becoming public issues. Light initially requested that 1,000 copies be printed, primarily for distribution within Harvard. By the late 1990s, he had received 18,000 requests for copies; the number reproduced on campuses is incalculable. Much to his surprise, Light became a national spokesperson for improved teaching and a greater focus on student learning. His advice was sound and practical: pay more attention to how your students learn, stimulate greater interaction among them, respond quickly to their work, and ask them to assess what they have learned on an ongoing basis. Although the reports shied away from confronting higher education’s research-oriented reward and value system, they contained within them implicit and potentially powerful notions: universities and professors should take greater responsibility for how much their students learn and there were practical steps that would improve learning.

Derek Bok and Richard Light combined to give further legitimization to the emergent focus on teaching and learning. Bok’s challenge that colleges and universities show value-added learning as an outcome of enrollment helped to push higher education toward a greater focus on outcomes, toward some notion of the business world’s bottom-line. Light’s proposals to modify teaching in the interests of greater student learning brought substance to what were often vague pleas to teach better. And, the implicit notion that faculty had more direct responsibility for how much their students learned held the seeds of a potential revolution.

The scholarship of teaching: Ernest L. Boyer

In the half-century after World War II, higher education’s faculty reward system became dominated by the ethos of research. Institutional stature and individual professorial prestige were intimately connected to research productivity, externally funded research grants, and awards for scholarly research. So powerful was the ethos of research that many colleges and universities with self-proclaimed teaching missions substantially increased the role of research in faculty hiring and promotions until it became a given of professorial life—even as few faculty actually did very much of it. The conundrum for the teaching and learning reforms was simple to state, but exceedingly difficult to resolve. Given the enchantment with research, how could institutions and faculty be convinced to dignify teaching with the same status as research? How could higher education shift from teaching as an honored but invisible activity, to use W. Norton Grubb’s phrase, to teaching that was both honored and visible (Grubb, et. al., 1999)?

The answer was actually quite simple, at least at the level of rhetoric. For Ernest Boyer, as well as for K. Patricia Cross and Lee Shulman (discussed below), higher education had to connect teaching and learning to faculty disciplinary and professional life. In particular, Boyer believed that scholarship could be redefined in such a way as to incorporate a wide variety of faculty work, including teaching. President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching between 1979 and his death in 1995, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, and former Chancellor of the State University of New York, Boyer’s solution to the dilemma of how to
give teaching public importance was brilliant: teaching would be recognized as a legitimate subject of research. As such, it could be subjected to the same kind of peer assessments as research. Rather than attacking higher education's preoccupation with scholarly productivity, and thus asking higher education to choose between research and teaching in a zero-sum game, Boyer called for teaching itself to become a scholarly activity.

Two reports by the Carnegie Foundation, both issued in 1987, initiated Boyer's campaign. Burton R. Clark's The Academic Life (1987) covered the landscape of what constituted professorial work. A well-respected sociologist whose article on the "cooling-out process" of community colleges was considered seminal by higher education scholars, Clark's book highlighted the "paradox of academic work:" most professors teach most of the time and many professors teach all of the time and do not publish scholarly studies, but teaching is neither highly valued nor highly rewarded. Rewards went for something in which only a very limited number of professors were engaged—research (Clark, 1987, p. 98). Boyer's College: the Undergraduate Experience in America (1987) presented the results of a three-year study of 29 colleges, highlighting a series of tensions embedded in higher education: discontinuity between colleges and high schools, student-versus-faculty expectations in the classrooms, and the pressure to publish versus teaching commitments. These tensions, Boyer believed, manifested deep confusion over institutional goals and revealed the need to establish a clear and vital collegiate mission. And that required an "integrated core... a program of general education that introduces students not only to general knowledge, but to connections across the disciplines, and in the end, to the application of knowledge to life beyond the campus" (p. 91).

Boyer's complaints and his proposed integrated core within a general education program were hardly new and his curricular prescriptions did not seem likely to elicit much comment or attention. Boyer's centrality in the emergent discussion of learning came instead from his attempt to re-situate teaching as a research activity. Highlighting Clark's finding that most professors spent most to all of their time teaching, Boyer claimed that most faculty, even those at small teaching colleges, nonetheless believed that research was more highly valued than teaching. Professors believed they worked in a system in which their primary activity—teaching—was diminished. And that problem, they and Boyer concluded, was rooted in a reward system that overemphasized research.

Boyer's answer, articulated in his most widely cited and controversial work, Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate (1990), broadened the definition of scholarship itself by defining in more creative ways what it meant to be a scholar. Rather than reject the value of scholarly research, a position that would have pitted him against the dominant trend of higher education, Boyer sought to convert teaching into a legitimate scholarly endeavor. He began by articulating four separate but overlapping functions of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. He affirmed the importance of "the scholarship of discovery" (basic research) and of applied scholarship devoted to resolving social, economic, and ecological problems, the two kinds of research higher education traditionally recognized and rewarded. But Boyer went further arguing that professors should be promoted and tenured for writing textbooks, for popular writing, for consulting and technical assistance to organizations, all ways of integrating knowledge and communicating it to larger audiences than those reached by traditional scholarship. These areas were infrequently commended or even taken into account by scholarly review committees. To give teaching even more legitimacy, Boyer believed, it needed to have its own rigorous assessment process. Boyer's message was to give teaching the same weight as research by subjecting it to rigorous assessments and by allowing professors to consider the creation of curriculum and the improvement of their teaching as a scholarly activity.

Tireless in disseminating his views, it seemed as if Scholarship Reconsidered was placed on almost every college and university president's desk, a way of announcing to faculty and the public that "my institution" was paying attention. Professional organizations hosted sessions, often with Boyer as the keynote speaker. College and university administrators wanting to increase faculty commitments to teaching and to improve its quality began to use Boyer's work to require fuller teaching dossiers in promotion and tenure decisions. Teaching as a scholarly activity—a phrase borrowed
from elementary and secondary classroom research—became a new higher education buzz word, what Lee Shulman, who replaced Boyer as head of CFAT, called the rendering of “one’s own practice as the problem for investigation” (Shulman, 1999).

And yet, while it had become hard by the end of the 1990s to ignore poor teaching, especially as institutions competed for students, and while some Ph.D. programs expressed greater interest in having their graduate students become better teachers; there was an add-on quality to the new emphasis on teaching. Boyer’s efforts seemed to further complicate being a professor, for one would have to be successful as a disciplinary-based researcher, as a researcher of one’s own teaching, and as a teacher. Faculty promotion would require successful teaching with no diminution of research productivity and the addition of a second line of research into teaching.

Nonetheless, Boyer’s proposal to give teaching greater weight by according it scholarly status received enormous rhetorical support and helped make teaching and learning a legitimate conversation on college campuses. At the end of the 1990s, his commitment to teaching as a scholarly activity received a substantial boost when the foundation he had led, in cooperation with the American Association for Higher Education, initiated major efforts to convert “rhetoric to action” (Hutchings and Shulman, 1999; Shulman, 1999). Boyer’s re-conceptualization provocatively offered a way to integrate teaching with scholarship for institutions reluctant to diminish their research agendas. Politically astute in understanding higher education’s ethos, he opened a door through which the learning reformers could try to walk.

Classroom assessment and classroom research: K. Patricia Cross

Most of higher education’s teaching and learning reformers were stronger on ideas and sweeping proposals than on developing concrete ways to change collegiate classrooms. Ways to implement new pedagogical strategies, deepen student learning, and be more creative in assessing learning were few and far between. The state-based assessment movement offered little help. While legislators and governors demanded greater accountability for learning, they essentially left methods to the same campuses and the professors who had, by and large, neither been invested in student learning nor been particularly creative in how to teach so that students learned more. How to conduct classrooms in which students learned had, however, begun to attract the attention of a few individuals and organizations. None was more influential than K. Patricia Cross.

An initial member of Light’s assessment seminars while a Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education before becoming Gardner Professor of Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, Cross established an international reputation during the 1970s at the Educational Testing Service for her work on community colleges, adult learners, and lifelong learning (Beyond the Open Door, 1971; Accent on Learning, 1976; Adults as Learners, 1981). As an officer of the American Association for Higher Education and a member of its board of directors, she actively pressed student learning as higher education’s primary agenda. Cross believed that teaching was a profoundly intellectual challenge, one refreshed by the opportunity to assess the impact of one’s teaching on students’ learning. It was thus important, if the learning reform movement was to make serious inroads into higher education’s practices, to make its ideas concrete. She did that by offering advice on how to assess one’s teaching and undertake classroom research to the benefit of students. Connected by her earlier work to the nation’s community colleges and the realization that adult learners should be taught differently than 18 and 19-year-olds, Cross used her stature to gain access to public universities that were especially vulnerable to the existing political pressures to show improved learning. She made “how to do it” her calling card.

Cross contributed two arguments to the learning reform movement. First, she found that almost no relationship existed between research on learning and collegiate teaching practices; college teachers paid little or no attention to what their learning research colleagues discovered. Second, she concluded that student feedback and the assessment of students could be used to improve teaching and student learning, provided these were done in a timely manner. The learning research community was having so little impact on college campuses because its work failed to pay attention to the actual classroom experiences of teachers—a charge also being laid against researchers in elementary and secondary education.
Researchers on teaching and learning talked at rather than with faculty in an environment that undervalued teaching anyway. Professors were either oblivious to the research or ignored it, helping to explain why national reports were more rhetorical flights of fancy than agendas for change. Reflecting on the disconnect between learning research and teaching practice in a 1998 speech, Cross declared: "I am distressed to see researchers—the acknowledged authorities of our times—talk about learning with no reference to the experience of teachers who have spent lifetimes accumulating knowledge about learning. But I am equally distressed to see workshops on faculty development in which faculty exchange views about student learning with no reference to what scholars know through study of the matter" (Cross, 1998).

Developing her arguments through the 1990s, Cross consolidated her views on assessment and research in the classroom in two books, Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers (with Thomas Angelo, 1993) and Introduction to Classroom Research (with Mimi Harris Steadman, 1996). College faculty could not be effective teachers unless they knew how to assess their teaching and their students' learning. There were, she believed, techniques—like the one-minute paper, learning logs, and student learning goals—that opened doors to what students learned in the classroom, doors that traditional forms of assessment like term papers and examinations only partially opened because they provided so little direct feedback as to be of almost no aid to either faculty or students. Feedback and classroom assessments should be immediate, constant, and converted into changes in practice for teaching to result in genuine improvements in student learning (Cross and Angelo, 1993). Introduction to Classroom Research (1996) summarized and extended these views by taking the rhetoric about the scholarship of teaching and giving it "operational definition." Since Cross believed the experiences of classroom teachers were the essential starting place for improvements in teaching and learning, she urged professors to engage in their own classroom research: observing students in the act of learning, reflecting and discussing observations and data with teaching colleagues, and reading the literature on learning. Determined to help faculty understand their teaching practices in order to improve student learning, Cross outlined the characteristics of classroom research:

- learner-centered: the attention of teachers and students is focused on observing and improving learning, rather than teaching;
- teacher-directed: classroom research changes the focus from teachers as consumers of research to teachers engaged in studies of learning in their discipline;
- collaborative: students and teachers are partners in the research on learning;
- context-specific: classroom research involves the teaching of a specific discipline to a particular group of students;
- scholarly: classroom research requires identifying a research question, developing and carrying out a research design (Cross and Steadman, 1996, pp. 2–3).

Cross' work on classroom assessment achieved widespread popularity. More than 50,000 copies of Classroom Assessment Techniques were sold. The American Association for Higher Education, in which she played an important role, increased its commitment to helping faculty and colleges in how to undertake classroom assessments. Numerous public and private universities and colleges, facing sharp criticisms from legislators and boards of trustees, concerned about their enrollments and retention rates, worried about the market consequences of dissatisfied families, and wanting to distinguish themselves as places where students learned, used Cross's ideas to initiate reforms.

More so than any other higher education reformer, Cross sought to shift the focus of the learning movement by bringing it directly into the classroom, ceaselessly presenting her ideas to higher education organizations and institutions, and, not insignificantly, developing a core of colleagues, like her co-authors Thomas Angelo and Mimi Harris Steadman, to extend her mission. She reiterated Boyer's view that teaching was a scholarly endeavor and made it concrete, showing how to undertake classroom research and continuous assessment. She thus used the status of research in an attempt to bring better teaching and improved learning to the classroom. Her arguments were both sweeping and concrete: faculty should understand and use research on learning; professors should understand the diff-
different motivations, academic backgrounds, and learning styles of their students; and they should carry out research in their classroom to improve their own teaching and students’ learning.

But Cross’ very concreteness, her emphasis on how to do it, made collegiate teaching and professors seem akin to secondary school teaching and teachers. There was an aura of teacher education and teacher professional development in both her approach and her tone, with the ironic result that her claim that teaching was an intellectual activity risked being displaced by instruction in teaching methods. Her approach thus found greater appeal to faculty and institutions that identified with the problems facing high school teachers than it did with those whose primary identifications were with disciplinary scholarship. Faculty and institutions that took their cues from graduate level work found Cross’ proposals too close to secondary education to be comfortable. She was appealing to only part of the academic marketplace.

By the early 21st century, Cross had spent more than two decades making the case that teaching and learning were the heart of the academic enterprise and that there were concrete ways to improve both, if only faculty wanted to do so. Her work generated enormous enthusiasm to improve teaching and learning and yet seemed insufficiently connected to what many professors thought of as scholarly. What Cross had shown was that it lay in the faculty’s power to improve the quality of their teaching and thereby to improve student learning. It was in the faculty’s power if only they would take the responsibility. And, in that, her work cast a long shadow over higher education’s traditional ways of doing things.

Connecting teaching to the disciplines: Lee Shulman

It was apparent that with the appointment of Stanford University’s Lee Shulman to the presidency of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT), Ernest Boyer’s efforts to create a scholarship of teaching would continue. For a number of years, Shulman had been calling for a tighter connection between the scholarly disciplines and the ways faculty taught. He believed that since the disciplines were themselves different, they should be taught differently. This meant that teaching was neither simply ‘methodological’—good versus bad methods—nor just disciplinary—presenting students with information about history or chemistry—but a deeply embedded combination of both, what Shulman called “pedagogical content knowledge.” The way one taught had to be varied by the discipline being taught. Shulman’s goal, when he assumed CFAT’s leadership, was thus simultaneously to extend Boyer’s notion of teaching as a scholarly activity and to convert that rhetoric into improved teaching practice.

Shulman argued that teaching at all levels was not primarily a matter of learning the technique, an approach that he believed often dominated teacher education programs, but rather an enactment of teachers’ understanding of their disciplines. Engaging in a wide range of teacher reform efforts, he came down on the side of teachers’ disciplinary knowledge as the necessary condition of effective teaching, a theme he initially applied to high school teachers and teacher preparation. Given his commitment to disciplinary-based knowledge, it was a relatively easy step for Shulman to add higher education to the mix since, for most college teachers, their discipline was the starting point for their teaching.

Because Shulman was committed to moving the scholarship of teaching beyond rhetoric and into practice, he was at pains to define it, both as a form of scholarly endeavor and as a way to change teaching in the interests of student learning. Recognizing that the scholarship of teaching and teaching in the interests of learning were hard sells, Shulman seemed to be taking on what was an insurmountable endeavor. Writing in 1999, in an attempt to clarify their understanding of the issues, Patricia Hutchings and Shulman wrote:

A scholarship of teaching is not synonymous with excellent teaching. It requires a kind of “going meta,” in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning—the conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it, and so forth—and so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advancing practice beyond it. This conception of the scholarship of teaching is not something we presume all faculty (even the most excellent and scholarly teachers among them) will or should do—though it would be good to see that more of them have the opportunity to do so if they wish. But the scholarship of teaching is a condition—as yet a mostly absent condition—for excellent teaching. It is the mechanism through which the pro-
fession of teaching itself advances, through which teaching can be something other than a seat-of-the-pants operation, with each of us out there making it up as we go. As such, the scholarship of teaching has the potential to serve all teachers and students (Hutchings and Shulman, 1999, pp. 13-14. See also Shulman, 1999).

Using his position as head of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT), with the help of Pat Hutchings (formerly director of the American Association for Higher Education Teaching Initiative and Assessment Forum), Shulman established the Carnegie Teaching Academy in 1998 aimed at moving the scholarship of teaching from, as he put it, rhetoric to action. This six-million-dollar, five-year effort, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and CFAT, reinforced and extended what had by the end of the 1990s become the learning reformers’ dominant modus operandi—the creation of a scholarship of teaching and learning, which would then improve the quality of student learning through new models of teaching and simultaneously raises the status of teaching itself.

The first of three components of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) was a national fellowship program that brought together over a five-year-period 122 faculty, deemed “Carnegie Scholars,” who were committed to inventing and sharing new conceptual models of teaching as scholarly work, to advance the profession of teaching, and to deepen students’ learning. Participants were selected on the basis of prior engagement in investigating and documenting teaching practice and student learning, as well as in working with peers and in larger networks on the scholarship of teaching. Each scholar’s project differed, from identifying the characteristics of a “good example” to assessing what students retained from science courses they completed. As a collectivity, CASTL’s projects were intended to share five characteristics, including exploration of teacher practice and the resultant student learning and a commitment to the development of students. To show institutional commitments, each participant’s campus had to contribute a release from ‘campus duties’—clearly not wanting to call for a release from teaching in order to improve teaching—$3000 for travel expenses, and a commitment to bring the participant’s work to the attention of others on campus.

The goal was to create a community of teaching scholars whose examples and missionary zeal could extend Shulman’s aims.

The second component of CASTL was the Teaching Academy Campus Program for universities and colleges in all sectors of higher education that wanted to make a commitment to new models of teaching as scholarly work. This program was run jointly with AAHE with the long-term goal of engendering a national network of campuses that provided a structure, support, and forum for the scholarship of teaching and learning. The campus program was a multi-tiered set of activities designed to initiate and build toward a network of institutions that actually changed the definition and practice of teaching on their campuses. After conducting “campus conversations” about the scholarship of teaching as a problem to be studied “through materials appropriate to disciplinary epistemologies, application of results to practice, communication of results, reflection and peer review,” institutions were expected to tailor this definition to their own situations and then select an area (or areas) for study and action, building on strengths, eliminating barriers, or bolstering campus ability to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Individual institutions quickly developed a variety of foci, exploring such issues as the effect of service learning on acquiring and generating disciplinary knowledge; intellectual property rights regarding syllabi, curricular materials, and web-based teaching materials; and instructional teams as curriculum builders. At a second stage institutions were expected to “go public,” using $5,000 grants to open their work to a wider audience for feedback and consumption. In a third stage, selected institutions were invited to become members of a National Teaching Academy.

The final component of CASTL focused on collaboration with scholarly and professional societies. The goal was to spread the notion of teaching as embedded in the disciplines by working directly with disciplinary and professional organizations of academics. CASTL established a small-grants program to support activities such as the dissemination of examples of the scholarship of teaching and learning in the field, experiments with new outlets, and efforts aimed at making graduate programs in the field more responsive to new ideas about scholarly work.
In reviewing these efforts, the breadth of commitment and the care that went into planning and organizing them stands in stark contrast to the more typical reform activities of throwing the reform at potential recipients with a lot of hype and some money. Shulman and his colleagues genuinely believed in building a community of people interested in investigating and documenting teaching as scholarly work. By redefining “scholarly work” to include teaching, by supporting presentations at scholarly societies, and by helping create networks of teacher-scholars, there is little question that they raised the profile and helped create a new kind of infrastructure that supported higher education teaching. These successes reflected Shulman’s goal to push the learning reform movement forward by adopting what is now the most common presumption of its protagonists from within higher education: reform will only occur when professors define teaching as a scholarly activity, seek to understand it as such, and revise their practices in light of research on teaching and learning.

Simple to state, difficult to create. Shulman had shifted his early emphasis on getting elementary and high schools and teacher education programs to pay attention to disciplinary-based teaching to an emphasis on getting colleges and universities to take student learning seriously. It was an extremely hard task. There is certainly some evidence that the profile of teaching on campuses was raised during the years that Shulman headed the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. But perhaps more telling, when Shulman stepped down as head of the Foundation in 2008, his replacement was another Stanford professor whose primary interest had always been elementary and secondary schools. CFAT, for the first time in its more than 100-year-history seemingly had shifted its attention away from higher education, calling into question Shulman’s (and Ernest Boyer’s) agenda. Although CFAT moved to focus on teaching in community colleges, the shift signaled the loss of steam in the teaching and learning revolution.

6.4 The reformers’ dilemma

Understanding how and why things happen illuminates the nature of the debates and the attempts at reform. Understanding that the assessment movement was the result of the drive for accountability at the national and state levels—and not the result of local campus initiatives to improve teaching and learning—sheds light on why the assessment movement’s reform efforts were framed as demands and threats to colleges and universities that they show better performance. A genuine conversation on how to improve student learning, however, depended upon a more intimate understanding of the complexities and realities of higher education’s value structure, depended more upon conversion and beliefs than heavy handed threats. The teaching and learning reformers understood that. They believed that higher education had indeed lost its way and that an industry that depended upon the dreams of millions to get ahead was self-destructing by adhering to a status and reward system that subordinated collegiate teaching and student learning to research and the authority of the academic disciplines. Their views pointed to a deeper failure: Higher education’s value and reward system did not require professors to take more than minimal responsibility for student learning and student development. Enlarging the importance of teaching and expecting improved learning from students was in fact an opportunity to revise higher education’s system of values.

The learning reformers started by using the research reward system itself as an avenue for change. If definitions of research could be expanded to encompass a scholarship of teaching, designed to aid professors improve the learning of their students, the very reward system that dominated and warped higher education could be effectively used in its reform. Boyer’s pleas to give teaching greater scholarly status, Cross’ efforts to show how one could undertake classroom research and assessment to improve teaching and student learning, and Shulman’s models of teaching based on disciplinary knowledge were all designed to re-conceptualize professors’ work along the lines that academically-oriented faculty could appreciate. The arguments were, in many ways, brilliant: Professors cared about teaching, but lacked the tools and the incentives to teach bet-
ter and to take greater responsibility for student learning. If the reformers could show faculty that research into how their students learned could be genuinely fulfilling and rewarded, it could foster widespread support where it matters—from within the professorial community itself.

During the 1980s and 1990s and into the 21st century, the official organizations of higher education joined the chorus. The American Association for Higher Education, prodded by close relationships to the reformers, took up the argument that higher education’s value and reward system was at odds with the central obligations of teaching and student learning. AAHE undertook a series of projects on assessments and faculty roles designed to help colleges and universities make the assessment of student learning congruent with faculty values. In addition to hosting national conventions, workshops, and symposia, AAHE’s journal, Change, under the editorship of Theodore Marchese, regularly published articles on assessment, new ways of teaching, and learning reforms. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching regularly convened panels and meetings of scholars that resulted in reports such as Scholarship Reconsidered (Boyer, 1990) and Scholarship Assessed (Glassick, et al., 1997).

Although the rhetoric of the learning reformers became widely used, documented improvements in teaching and student learning do not seem to have occurred. Boyer’s conception of a scholarship of teaching received enormous national attention, but it neither reshaped college and university campuses nor altered traditional teaching practices. While Cross’ classroom assessment techniques achieved considerable popularity, reforms have primarily occurred within limited sectors of higher education, and their breadth and depth seem questionable. Her insistence that faculty engage in classroom research as a way to improve learning posed a serious threat to most professors’ usual way of doing business. It appears to have had little impact on colleges and universities that continue to place scholarship at the forefront of their reward system, although individual professors seem to use her ‘one-minute’ end-of-class summaries. Shulman’s programs, while supported with substantial funding, were too often based on the premise “we will give opportunities to reformers and they will teach the rest,” an uncertain foundation from which to initiate change in an industry or an organization.

The learning revolution thus seems far away, replaced by a new wave of reform based on a technological imperative that, if enough technology is used, students will truly learn more; the era of Power Point and web-based interactive distance learning is upon us. Assessment, outcomes, value-added are now buzz words on campuses, even as they lack any serious connection to teaching practices and faculty rewards. There may be a certain amount of campus conversations on alternative approaches to teaching and the assessment of student learning, but there also appears to be little dialogue of substance and implementation of reforms at most colleges and universities that would enhance student learning. The slogan “involvement in learning” is widely bandied about in a variety of forms, and there are hundreds of active classrooms where students take responsibility for their learning. But such efforts have not yet led to serious assessments of student learning; the internet itself, although in constant use by students, is often seen as a threat by professors—witness the outcry over Wikipedia’s accuracy even as it has become the students’ research tool of choice. Most strikingly, there have been few real changes in a value and reward system that remains fixated on faculty research and scholarly production, although many colleges and universities insist that teaching evaluations be part of faculty review for promotion and tenure.

The rhetoric and the limited changes suggest that the efforts to change teaching and improve learning are actually battles over institutional values and rewards. Almost all the signals of the last decades said that scholarly productivity and research grants gave the institution value and brought rewards to professors—promotion, tenure, higher salary, and prestige in the free-agent marketplace. Gradients exist in the broad spectrum of colleges and universities, but even many of the institutions that define their primary mission as teaching give research grants and publications high status. For faculty who want to make teaching and student learning the centerpiece of their existence, little institutional support exists. Professors remain connected to their disciplines; they teach subject matter and assess the students’ levels of knowledge through tests and papers, sometimes projects and classroom participation, and give out grades.
They are highly resistant to efforts to make them more responsible for students’ learning and hostile to external agencies that make demands, including even their own university’s administration. The pressure to change is blunted by the continuing student demand for higher education. The classroom continues to be treated as a private domain protected by academic freedom; “thou shalt not enter” continues to be a professorial prerogative. While there are a spate of institutional and some national awards recognizing outstanding teaching, and some professors have achieved prominence for analyzing why their students were not learning and then modifying their teaching, the recognition has done little to revise institutional cultures.

The values/rewards dilemma is exacerbated by the continuing influence of the origins of the learning reform movement. Initiated by fiscal concerns and criticism of higher education’s organizational and governance structures, the reform of teaching and learning was initially seen by external bodies as a way to hold institutions accountable and to establish a basis upon which to make budgetary allocations. As state legislatures and governors concluded that their imposition of student assessment was neither leading to greater accountability nor were the results aiding them in their fiscal decisions, they quickly shifted to performance outcomes that were relatively simple to measure and to compare across institutions: retention and graduation rates, scores on standardized professional tests, acceptance rates into graduate schools, alumni salaries, student-faculty ratios and contact hours. The goal continues to be to hold higher education accountable for the funds it receives and the effect seems largely to be professorial resistance to taking responsibility for student learning seriously.

There are at least two other continuing dilemmas that face the efforts to improve teaching and learning. The first is simply the problem of imitation and the hostility of most graduate departments preparing future professors. Most new professors more or less imitate what they remember of their professors’ modes of teaching. In the best of circumstances, they choose to build upon the best of the professorial instructors—but even when they try to innovate, the weight of decades of schooling in which instructors talked at students, who had to learn what they were being told, is too great to overcome. This is exacerbated by graduate programs that do not take their students’ future roles as teaching professors all that seriously. The road to professorial success in the academy, and certainly at the elite institutions, remains research productivity. Why would you teach doctoral students how to teach, when they are going to get faculty jobs, promotions, and tenure largely based on their research?

The second dilemma is, unfortunately, barely noticed. Or, if it is, the recognition of it usually comes in the form of complaints about the wired generation, the instant gratification generation, the ‘is it going to get me a job’ generation—take your pick. As Rebecca Cox (2009) has shown, the gap is huge even between those instructors seeking to engage their students in learning, hoping that they will take away from the engagement ways of thinking about issues, able to distinguish among different pieces of evidence, and aware of complexity and their students, who often have very narrow definitions of “real” instruction and “useful” knowledge. Students and professors may misunderstand one another in fundamental ways that can only be overcome with a great deal of commitment and energy on both sides. The view, too often still held by those in higher education, that faculty are there to teach their subjects and then get out of the way of the students so that they can learn and complete their tasks, retains much of its traditional power—over both students and faculty.

Still, if the revolution has not occurred, the rumblings about learning have become too loud to ignore, especially as colleges and universities find themselves in intense competition for students. Community colleges, faced with growing competition from open access four-year institutions and from for-profit distance education suppliers and seeing students go through revolving doors, entering and leaving with regularity, are looking for ways to connect the college more tightly to job markets, to improve transfer programs to four-year schools, and to create more sustainable learning environments. Four-year institutions are worrying about high completion rates, students who simply disappear, at substantial fiscal cost to the school, whose failure to graduate lowers the institution’s ranking and raises a red flag to public officials and accreditation agencies about educational quality. In response, they are instituting early identification and intervention programs for students experi-
encing academic difficulties and trying to connect those programs to learning. Learning and writing centers have been increasing in number, as have writing sections connected to departments and individual courses. Highly selective institutions are modifying their self-descriptions to show that they are more student-learner centered than their rivals. Almost in spite of itself, higher education has been driven to experiment with learning. Residential and non-residential institutions are trying out "learning communities" to connect faculty and students in the pursuit of improved learning. Efforts at curricular reform include rethinking general education and core requirements and introducing and expanding interdisciplinary majors. Student portfolios to assess student learning continue to have some saliency, although the optimism of two decades ago has not yielded fruit. Teaching experiments receive administrative support, at least when there is no financial crisis. A number of campus teaching centers and awards for teaching exist. Competency-based learning in health education has extended to other areas. And, growing rapidly, distance education and the use of interactive technology may challenge the most sacrosanct traditions of teaching and learning. There is no revolution, but maybe there is hope for improvement.
Higher Education
and the American Dream
Success and its Discontents

Marvin Lazerson

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CHAPTER 7

Why is higher education so hard to reform?

*I can’t get no satisfaction. And I try.*

(The Rolling Stones)

Americans' faith in the power of education to cure everything is all-encompassing. This gospel of education asserts that social, economic, political, and ethical problems can be solved through schooling. Whatever the difficulties and the aspirations—economic development and individual economic success, social instability and social security, global competition and national identity, intolerance and tolerance, religious and secular values, economic productivity and satisfaction at work, the list could go on and on—the Education Gospel assumes that schooling can solve the problem and meet the goals.

The essential message connected to such terms as ‘knowledge society’, ‘information society’, and high-tech revolution’ is that life in the 21st century will require people with skills associated with knowledge and information, and that these can best be learned in schools, especially the skills that come with college education and beyond. In the face of intense global competition, the need to make decisions about complex problems, to preserve democracy, and to bring ethical behavior and tolerance into a world that often seems to reward the opposite, as well as enhancing each individual’s chances at professional status, economic success, and social security, mass schooling is absolutely necessary. It assures economic growth and democracy.

In the United States, the gospel of education has produced remarkable results. America has provided more schooling for more people sooner and for longer periods of time than any other country. Millions of immigrants and their families, millions of poor and
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working class, millions of previously discriminated against can attest to the remarkable openness and opportunities available through education. Faith in the Education Gospel lies at the heart of America’s belief in itself. It is one of the givens of the American Dream.

The problem with the Gospel is not the faith itself, but rather its exaggeration, its tendency to deny the importance of so many other aspects of global, national, and individual existence. Schools are not always the best places to learn about life, and certainly not the exclusive places to learn about work. And, because the Gospel has in the last decades become so closely attached to economic success for the nation and for individuals, it has become a distorting lens through which education is seen primarily—often exclusively—as a transmission belt. One goes to school in order to get to the next level of schooling. Schooling’s value lies in its payoffs; the more schooling, the larger expected payoffs.

This exaggerated faith leads to a continuing condition of dissatisfaction, since schools simply cannot accomplish all that Americans expect of it, and certainly not for all the people who spend time in school. At best, the expectations can only be partially realized, leading to an environment in which proposals to change, reform, or punish schools are a way of life, leading to constant tampering with education, with the misguided hope that there is a right recipe that just has to be put in place. The tampering is almost always initiated from outside schools at every level, from kindergarten through graduate education. Constantly badgered by yet another attempt at reform or more accurately, by multiple reforms simultaneously, those within schools—teachers, professors, administrators—more often than not hold the line. They both believe in what they are doing and they understand that in a short period of time yet another set of reforms will be on the agenda. The first step, then, in improving education is to see it as one of many institutions and policy options available for economic growth, social progress, and individual success. Education is important—very important—but there are so many other things that have to be improved if education is to come closer to achieving its aspirations.

7.1 Money matters—if used correctly

Higher education’s success has been built on its ability to gain a near monopoly on access to the American Dream. The monopoly is not total; the media provides the occasional story about the self-made individual who made it without much schooling, but the occasions are rare. Colleges and universities have taken over the preparation of skilled labor, the provision of expert knowledge, and scientific research. That success has brought with it millions and millions of dollars from public and private sources. Higher education’s success in attracting money stimulates the desire for even more money. The search for gold has become an ever-present phenomenon. It is the dominating characteristic of American higher education. In the words of Harvard’s former president, Derek Bok:

Universities learned that they could sell the right to use their scientific discoveries to industry and find corporations willing to pay a tidy sum to sponsor courses delivered by Internet or cable television. Apparel firms offered money to have colleges place the corporate logo on their athletic uniforms or, conversely, to put the university’s name on caps and sweatshirts sold to the public. Faculty members began to bear such titles as Yahoo Professor of Computer Science or K-Mart Professor of Marketing (Bok, 2003, pp. 1-2).

This phenomenon of selling one’s self is not new, but the size, the amounts, and the intensity of the last few decades are. The amounts that became and remain available are staggering. What was once a story of survival—we need funds to keep going—or about selected investments—our faculty and students need laboratories—has become a focus on profits. In Bok’s words, the commercialization of higher education refers to efforts “to make a profit from teaching, research, and other campus activities” (Bok, 2003, p.3; see also Kirp, 2003).

Money is not a bad thing. Without funding from external sources, the cost of going to college would rise even more precipitously than it has, and higher education would likely return to a much more limited enterprise, cutting off large numbers of young people and adults from the opportunities it provides. Without external funding, research would revert to industrial and commercial laboratories, where potential income returns and secrecy would dominate every
step of the research process. Few of us would think that would be a good thing for society.

Still the ceaseless desire for money has an obscene quality to it, in part because profit often seems to become an end in itself, rather than a genuine attempt to improve the quality of education. Profit as an end in itself makes higher education look little different than other industries. There are other disturbing aspects. The availability of money has made it difficult to make hard decisions about what is and is not important. The tendency has been to build and to add on without serious consideration of what is no longer working well, what is no longer worth doing, and what can and needs to be changed. Greater income converts into more expenditure without a clear sense of what should no longer be done. In the years leading up to the financial crisis of 2008-09, colleges and universities of every shape and form used the funds they received to start new projects, institute new kinds of programs, create more attractive settings for students and professors without taking seriously what needs to disappear, be modified, or dramatically improved. Hard decisions were in short supply, because the goal was often to spend money without eliciting conflict.

The recent financial crisis appears to have modified that, but appearances can be deceiving. Cutting jobs, freezing new appointments, closing programs, unpaid furloughs, postponing capital investments and delaying needed maintenance are emotionally difficult and, for the people directly affected, painful. But such decisions, taken under intense pressure to balance budgets, do not necessarily lead to rethinking what really matters or where the resources, when they return, should be invested. The sad story of having money over the last decades was the tendency to spend rather than think through what the institution should be about. Whether the latter will occur in the coming decades remains an open question, but unless attitudes fundamentally change, the likelihood is high that higher education will revert back to the same patterns of the last few decades. Maybe it will even get worse, since the panic of not having money remains, further intensify the desire to gather even more than in the past.

An alternative is for higher education to take note of the mounting research on learning and the financing of elementary and secondary education. Here, the evidence is clear: money matters. Any-one who says it does not when it comes to learning is either an idiot or a liar. Yes, there is excellent teaching and a lot of learning occurring in very poorly-funded schools, colleges, and universities, but the differences in teaching conditions, learning environments, and retention rates are often so dramatic compared to affluent institutions that huge successes, when they occur, are extraordinary occurrences. Without money, instructors are poorly-paid, better facilities are not built and existing ones deteriorate, and the technology and supplies necessary to learning are unavailable. Money is necessary, but it also not sufficient.

What W. Norton Grubb (2009, p. xii) has written with regard to elementary and secondary schooling applies also to higher education: “leadership, vision, cooperation among teachers, effective instruction, unbiased information about effective versus ineffective practices, stability, consistent district and state policies—are necessary as well.” And, if money is to be used effectively to improve learning, it and the other resources have to be focused on the educational process itself and not on ancillary activities. For higher education, this may be even more difficult than in elementary and secondary schools. The latter have fundamental learning responsibilities, and while these are often supplemented with a variety of extra-curricula activities and social development responsibilities, the fact is, that schools cannot escape the expectation that children and youth will learn in them. The involvement by parents in their children’s educational lives, as well as the political (and scholarly) attention drawn to how well children are (and are not) learning in elementary and secondary schools is one measure that learning is the ‘bottom line’, the way to decide whether a school or classroom is functioning or not.

For universities and colleges, the question of learning is murkier. With many faculty supposed to be researchers and with many colleges and universities making research productivity the essential requirement of appointment, promotion, and tenure, the question of how much students are actually learning receives less attention. Traditions of disciplinary-based knowledge—one is a historian not a teacher—combined with the strongly held belief by college and university instructors that the classroom is a private domain protected by academic freedom have made it extremely difficult to
intervene on behalf of improved instruction, leaving higher education leaders wary of intervening to improve teaching and learning. Added to this, almost no one in higher education takes seriously research findings on students’ learning. If elementary and secondary education has suffered from repeated waves of reforms, with new ones showing up in a continuing fashion, higher education has manifested the opposite condition. Most ideas on how to improve learning are simply ignored; the reigning ideology, even with the various student support systems that have been created, is that the students who enter colleges and universities have a responsibility to learn. If they do not, they suffer the consequences.

Still the evidence that students can learn more than they are currently is there, and if some of it were injected into colleges and universities, financial investments might flow in a better direction than in the past. Here are a few suggestions:

- Emphasize instruction. This turns out to be simple to say and hard to do, because it would require breaking ranks with the rhetoric and practice that exalts and rewards everything else—from research through athletics. It requires providing genuine rewards for good teaching and not as add-ons to the reward system, i.e. as in everything stays the same, but we are adding some “outstanding teacher awards” in the form of a gift certificate to the bookstore and a plaque. And, it would provide incentives for cooperative teaching, again not as adjuncts to budgets, but as a fundamental expectation that it is worth funding more than other things.

- Create more personalized learning environments. Helping students gain a stake in what they are learning, enabling them to cooperate with one another, developing a sense of trust about learning between instructors and students through learning communities, living and learning residential programs, majors within majors that allow small groups of students to distinguish themselves from the hundreds of departmental or programmatic majors.

These proposals seem so obvious that their absence, beyond the frequent rhetorical flights of fancy about the commitment to student learning, poses serious questions about whether higher education really cares about learning, which is at the heart of what needs to be changed. The recommendations also require money, which means that institutions that are financially poor will have more difficulty implementing them than those with access to money. Unfortunately the overriding inequalities in the financing of higher education institutions cannot be overcome without dramatic changes in public policy. Still every institution that genuinely wants its students to learn can take steps to do so, showing a willingness to reallocate money to where it really matters, rather than wait for the new money to come in so that learning can be added to the agenda.

7.2 Stop the loud music

When I was growing up my father and grandfather worked in a New York City factory. In order to hear themselves over the noise of the machinery, they had to shout. Of course, all the others around them were also shouting, so they learned to shout even more loudly. This shouting as the basic form of conversation continued when they sat down at the dinner table. One consequence of this, was that in order to make myself heard I too shouted, often more loudly than...
they did. One younger sister joined in the shouting. A second sister, considerably younger than the two of us, responded over the years by leaving the dinner table screaming.

My reaction to all of this noise, since there was no such thing as a conversation, was to go to my room, and turn on a New York City radio station that was introducing its listeners to rhythm and blues, what soon became known as rock and roll. I turned the music up very loudly, which of course led to more shouting, a sister playing her music more loudly, and my grandfather and father turning the sound up on the family television—and in the paper-thin walls of a Levitt house in the 1950s, every sound could be heard, if not understood.

Over the years, I began to think about my family in the context of educational reform. What became clear to me is that the advocates of educational reform, from all sides of the political spectrum, behave like my family did—shout and play loud music, with each participant or each supporter of ‘whatever’ turning up the sound. Since at least one group of reformers is always shouting, other reformers have to shout even more loudly to be heard, leading to seemingly unending rounds of loudly played music.

In these situations, no one can really hear anyone’s music, so everyone simply stops listening and becomes highly effective and efficient at screening out all forms of music except for one’s own. Over the years this has left us with almost no capacity to listen to anyone but ourselves and our friends, and it has utterly demolished our ability to engage in serious conversations about education. In higher education, it essentially means that very little ever really changes and that when change occurs, it often exists in a kind of parallel universe. One group gets what it wants, while the others continue to have what they previously had. A colleague once said to me that he had lived through 6 or 7 provosts at the university, each of them ‘reform-minded’, but as far as he could see, his life as a professor had stayed almost exactly the same—we are talking here about a 30-year stretch. In this context, it makes little difference what educational researchers, public officials, administrators and professors, or students say, since the music is so blaring that people more or less only hear what they already believe to be true.

There is little in the way of serious conversations, although there is a lot of shouting.

Things are not going to get better and reform will not really occur unless the competing players lower the music, limit the shouting, and stop acting as if what they have to say is the only thing that matters. Until that happens, no one really hears anything. For colleges and universities that is a tragedy.

7.3 There are no silver bullets

Next to The Shadow, which was introduced by Orson Welles, my favorite radio program as a child was The Lone Ranger. In contrast to playing rock and roll loudly, I would keep the Lone Ranger radio program quiet, not wanting my parents to know that I was in bed with my ears glued to the radio for the stirring overture that introduced the program. As I moved from the 1950s into the 1960s, and the Lone Ranger had moved to television, I understood that this white man who wore a mask was politically incorrect. White men just did not have faithful Indian companions named Tonto. But in the 1950s, the Lone Ranger was one of my outlets to a world beyond my family.

There were always two stirring moments in the program. One came at the very end, when someone who had been helped by the Lone Ranger would ask: “Who is that masked man?” A voice would answer, “that’s the Lone Ranger” and over the music would come a voice, “hi ho Silver”—Silver was the Lone Ranger’s horse. The other stirring moment came early in the show and was much more interesting to me, for it meant that the real action was about to begin. It was when someone would notice the Lone Ranger’s bullets, and would say, “why those are silver bullets, mister.” That meant, that the Lone Ranger was on the case and the action would begin.

Through years of talking with Patricia A. Graham about education, I became reacquainted with silver bullets, for Graham would hold firmly to the position that as long as educational reformers kept searching and believing in instant cures, like medical researchers looking for the antibiotic, vaccine, or gene that would eliminate the disease, our educational problems would not be solved. The Lone
Ranger’s silver bullets were just that, since they never missed their mark and they always landed where the Lone Ranger wanted them to. Americans treat educational reform much like the Lone Ranger’s silver bullets, and they have for a long time. What is relatively new has been the application of silver bullets to higher education reform. In the last few decades, the number of simple resolutions to complex problems looks a lot like the Lone Ranger’s approach: eliminate the problem within a half-hour, including commercial breaks. The accountability movement of the 1980s, the increased wave of accreditation efforts, the ‘let’s make teaching a scholarly activity’, the repeated efforts to amend general education, the growth of interdisciplinary studies, a bewildering array of new programs and new technologies—all get presented as if these were the breakthroughs. But unlike medical research, there are few if any breakthroughs in education, which is a slow, sometimes painful, sometimes joyful process that requires constant effort and attention, and whose payoffs are always down the road. We rarely know what we have accomplished until many years later, and even then, we can never be sure how much was education’s doing.

One of the best things we can do is to bury the belief that any single reform, even one we very much believe in, is going to do all that much. Education is a complex business and many things need to happen to improve it. Silver bullets just don’t make it and the Lone Ranger could not possibly have shot so perfectly. Even when we are on the right track, education takes a long time to have an effect. Learning does not occur over night. And so, we have a responsibility to say as clearly as we can, that what we want to do may help some if we do it right, but no reform is a silver bullet that will make the educational problem disappear. Sorry, Lone Ranger.

7.4 How about playing within your game

One of the saddest aspects of U.S. higher education is the “wan-a-be” phenomenon, the desire, wish, and impulse to be like the other place, especially if the other place has a higher reputation, more money, and greater status than you do. One sees this in a variety of circumstances. Local and regional colleges and universities that admit the overwhelming majority of applicants, whose students are overwhelmingly from a relatively circumscribed geographic area, who are overwhelmingly enrolled in professional programs, continue to describe themselves as the ‘Harvard of the region’, make faculty appointments of graduates of the big research universities, declare how important it is that their professors be researchers, and talk incessantly about their international connections. None of this, taken singly, is bad. Why not aspire to emulate Harvard? Why not recruit professors from the best doctoral programs in the U.S.? Why not make research the primary decider of promotion and tenure? Taken together, however, such efforts at emulation miss the possibilities of being powerful teaching institutions and serious contributors to the skilled labor market and social and economic development in the neighborhoods and region within which the institution lives.

I was reminded of this during the summer of 2004, when I watched the European Soccer Championships. Like soccer’s World Cup, the European championships involve an initial series of qualifying rounds that occur over the course of almost 2 years. The actual championships begin with round robins involving a small group of teams, with the top teams in each group entering the final round. The final games, like the NCAA basketball tournament, are one loss and you are out variety. As the qualifying round robin got underway—indeed in the opening game against highly favored Portugal—the national team from Greece began to win games it was supposed to lose. This was surprising, as every soccer commentator noted, because the Greeks had no superstars. Indeed, the player who emerged as Greece’s best goal scorer during the tournament was not even in the starting line-up for the German soccer club he played for during the regular season. Pretty soon, everybody started to take the Greek team seriously, and attention turned to the team’s German coach, who, it was said, had convinced his players to “play within their game.” Well, playing within their game worked for the Greeks, and in one of the biggest surprises ever in European soccer, the national team of Greece became the European champions.

For those of you who are not sport fans, the phrase “playing within your game” probably doesn’t mean anything. Others will recognize it as a shorthand phrase that essentially means that a team of not especially great players has learned to draw upon and
combine its individual strengths to make for strong team play. Playing within your game says that these players taken together are stronger as a team than the individual parts. Parenthetically, this is now a relatively rare characteristic of professional sports in the U.S., where individual superstars determine the character of teams.

Many colleges and universities have no idea what it is to play within your game. In fact, most of them have no game plan other than looking like the reputed better, more affluent, higher status institution down the road, around the corner, in a different part of the state, or in some other section of the country. Even community colleges, whose very existence lies in their capacity to aid students in gaining access to skilled labor markets and local four-year colleges or universities, talk about becoming four-year bachelor degree granting institutions. A lot of effort thus gets put into becoming something one is not rather than being really good at what you are. The “wan-a-be” phenomenon means that institutions are constantly looking somewhere else for their models of what they should be. In the end, too many institutions have no real purpose other than to be like something else. This means there is insufficient attention or opportunity to build upon and blend an institution’s strengths to make it a better place to be. The notion of playing within your game in order to make the institution better is almost an oxymoron. It hardly ever exists.

7.5 It is hard to be really good when conditions are so unequal

It would be a mistake to think that all institutions can achieve high levels of performance simply on their own. The inequalities of wealth make that impossible. The differences are substantial.

In 2000–2001, research universities in California spent $16,293 per student for instructional purposes. The amount spent per student at the state colleges was $10,787 and at the community colleges, with the greatest variety of students and the greatest challenges, $4,606 was spent per student. The amounts reported undoubtedly underplay the differences, since the research universities spent considerably more on non-instructional items than the state colleges and community colleges (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004, p. 73).

Nationally, for data also covering 2000–01, (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002, Table 342), spending per full-time equivalent student varied from $32,512 in research universities to $17,780 in public doctoral institutions to $11,345 in public universities granting master’s degrees to $7,665 in community colleges. This more than four-fold difference between the per student expenditures attests to the fact that while almost everybody can go to some college, one is not treated equally, and those with the most difficulty in school are treated less equally than the others.

The financial differences reveal that higher education bets on winners and losers in the race to the American Dream. It offers itself as the route to the Dream, but it does so in highly stratified ways. Who will have access to which colleges and to which degrees and who will have the kind of support that converts access into achievement remain too closely connected to one’s origins to be brushed under the rug of “everyone in America has the opportunity to go to college.” Higher education does provide access to the American Dream, but it does so in divided ways that will continue to be contested, controversial, and lead to political confrontations over its behavior. The extraordinary successes mean that our expectations for higher education will continue to grow, and with that will come further discontentment.