

Carnegie Relevance Project

Knowledge for What?

Obstacles and Opportunities for Reinvigorating the Social Purpose of the University

Workshop – June 3-4, 2019

University of Notre Dame

Washington, DC Office

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Washington, DC 20036

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Disciplinary Professionalization and the Social Purpose of the University

Concern that the professionalization of academic disciplines has led universities to disengage from practical affairs is long-standing, manifesting itself in books from Robert Lynd's 1939 *Knowledge for What?* to Ian Shapiro's 2005 *Flight From Reality in the Human Sciences*.¹ Today, among American universities, an "ideology of basic research" now defines their mission.² As the late Donald Stokes put it, "in academic research circles ... the ideal of pure inquiry still burns brightly."³ Such an approach is necessarily driven by its own internal agendas and criteria so as not to contaminate the process of science with normative or practical considerations.⁴ Lord Acton had outlined that mind-set many years earlier: "I think our studies ought to be all but purposeless. They want to be pursued with chastity, like mathematics."⁵ More recently, Abraham Flexner, the founding director of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, reportedly preemptively declined an invitation to his colleague Albert Einstein from President Franklin Roosevelt on the grounds that "Professor Einstein has come to Princeton for the purpose of carrying on his scientific work in seclusion, and it is absolutely impossible to make any exception which would inevitably bring him into public notice."⁶ It should therefore not be surprising that as the social and natural sciences increasingly emphasized their "scientific" character, universities became more disengaged from practical affairs.⁷

The deleterious consequences of these developments for the broader purpose of science and the university were pointedly highlighted in an interview that the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* conducted with Dr. Richard Horton, the editor of the distinguished British medical journal *The Lancet*:

Last year, you wrote about the crisis in scientific publishing: that despite technological advances, the state of scientific publishing today has never been more precarious. You mentioned the mega-journals,

¹ Robert Lynd, *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1939) and Ian Shapiro, *The Flight From Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Roger L. Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities Since World War II*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16 and 168.

³ Donald E. Stokes, *Pasteur's Quadrant: Basic Science and Technological Innovation* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 135.

⁴ Robert N. Proctor, *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4-5.

⁵ Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 31.

⁶ Abraham Flexner, *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 57.

⁷ Joseph A. Schumpeter, "Science and Ideology," *The American Economic Review* Vol. 39, No. 2 (March 1949): 346 and Bender, *Intellect and Public Life*, 5-6 and 131.

where they can publish hundreds, maybe even thousands of articles, and a disconnect between the publications and the community they aim to serve. Can you tell us how you are tackling these problems?

What is science for? If we go back and look at Diderot's great encyclopedia in the 17th century, in the introduction it talks about publishing knowledge for the advantages of society. You don't publish for your CV, for your next grant or for your tenure. The reason why knowledge was being brought together was for specific social purposes. We've lost that in science. Unfortunately, we created an academic system that is more about the academy and the career of the scientist than it is about the public and the translation of the research for the benefit of society.

That's a very harsh observation.

Right, to my great regret. In the last 400 years, science has lost its soul, its purpose and its meaning. Academic publishing is part of it. We, too, have lost our purpose and our meaning. We have to add moral purpose into science. Why should the public support scientific research unless it's getting a return back? Scientists want freedom to study – and I understand that – but the pendulum has swung too far toward the scientists and we have to bring it back toward the public.⁸

Left to their own devices academic disciplines tend to resolve the tensions between rigor and relevance by favoring the former.⁹ While a variety of different factors play some role in the peacetime decline in policy relevance among social scientists,¹⁰ I focus on the process of what Thomas Kuhn famously termed “normal science” and the impact of institutional dynamics – both vested interests and institutional self-image. Normal science and organizational interest explain why the social sciences tend to isolate themselves from the rest of society and the culture of “science” accounts for the particular way in which they do so. The tragedy of the professionalization of social science is that it is both the engine of scientific progress but also contains the seeds of its own irrelevance.¹¹

The Carnegie/Bridging the Gap Equity in these Broader Developments

As Carnegie Corporation International Peace and Security program director Stephen Del Rosso reminds us, it was the late Stanford University political scientists Alexander George who first explicitly highlighted the urgency of “bridging the gap” between academia and the national security policy world. In his view, and that of other scholars who tried to maintain a foot inside both the ivory tower and the

⁸ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-my-daughter-would-ask-me-dad-why-do-you-hate-jews-1.5474395>.

⁹ Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible: The American Debate Over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 71. Also, see Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 146 for a related discussion of the tendency of academics to “retreat’ into professional purity.”

¹⁰ Edward Shils, “Social Science and Social Policy,” *Philosophy of Science* Vol. XVI (1949): 219-221.

¹¹ I develop this argument further in *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

beltway, by the early 1990s this was becoming increasingly difficult. This growing estrangement was unfortunate, in Del Rosso's view, because "good policy is informed by good ideas, and good ideas are not formed in a vacuum." This led Carnegie not only to emphasize the real-world impact of their regular grant-making but also to invest in programs that explicitly analyze and seek to find ways to rebuild the bridges between the two worlds.¹²

While some scholars and policymakers such as our colleagues in the Carnegie-sponsored "Bridging the Gap" project advocate incremental reform within the current academic system, others, particularly MIT's Stephen Van Evera, maintain that only whole-sale reform can ensure that academic social science will once again engage policy problems on a sustained basis.¹³ Van Evera proposes to remake and reorganize social science disciplines, departments, and programs to focus on problems rather than disciplines to better serve society. Today social science is organized around its disciplines: political science, economics, history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. This disciplinary structure, in his view, leads scholars to focus on arcane disciplinary concerns while allowing them to wander away from addressing and solving real-world problems. It also creates silos that separate scholars in different disciplines who could help each other solve problems if they cooperated more closely. One result is that disciplinary agendas drive research, rather than practical problems. Another is that potential synergies between scholars in separate disciplines are lost in his view. Thus, the current disciplinary system in U.S. academic social sciences is doubly dysfunctional. It nurtures irrelevance and impedes creativity.

He believes that a larger reorganization of social science might eventually be considered. Under this reorganization we would break down the current disciplinary silos where they are an impediment to progress; and then rebuild multidisciplinary departments and programs that focus on problems the world deems important. Without taking a position on whether incremental change is sufficient, or whole-sale reform is necessary, we propose engaging a related question: Is a reorganization of the disciplinary basis of the university even possible?

To date, no feasibility study has looked at whether interdisciplinary programs focused on real-world problems, rather than disciplinary agendas, can survive and even flourish in an academic environment organized primarily around disciplinary silos? An audit of all unrealized cross-disciplinary synergies in the social sciences would have to be made. How many potentially fruitful cross-disciplinary relationships are now impeded by disciplinary silos and barriers? We should also look for unrealized potentially fruitful relationships between social and natural scientists.

Indeed, reorganization offers unique opportunities for university provosts, presidents, boards of trustees, and state and federal government leaders interesting in reestablishing the balance between rigor and relevance in American universities. In normal times university leaders have a hard time shaping the nature of departments and programs. Reorganizations give them moments of much greater power. They can insist on conditions for the creation of new programs (as they cannot in normal times). Thus moments of reorganization would be opportunities to institute new tenure standards that reward contributions to policy discourse; to inject professional ethics that require policy-relevant research

¹² https://www.carnegie.org/media/filer_public/83/c2/83c2aac2-0089-4426-b6c3-7f4e71c3f13a/ccny_reporter_2014_vol7no4.pdf.

¹³ Stephen Van Evera, "U.S. Social Science and International Relations, *War on the Rocks*, February 9, 2015 at: <https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/u-s-social-science-and-international-relations/>.

focus; and to institute higher stature for policy practitioners in schools and programs where their presence is appropriate.

The most commonly heard objection to a whole-sale reorganization of the academy is that it is not feasible. But there are also potential down-sides and serious obstacles to radical reform that need to be considered. These include: 1) How would such programs place their Ph.D.s in an academic ecosystem dominated by disciplinary departments? 2) There would likely be significant costs of major organizational change that would need to be factored into any plan for such change. 3) Some might argue that this view presents an idealized image of the natural sciences, which experience many of the same bureaucratic rigidities as other parts of the university. 4) We do not have many examples of higher education leaders undertaking major change and so their ability to over-come institutional inertia may be less than we think it is. 5) Finally, we need to recognize that the current system oriented toward what philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn calls “Normal Science” has some real virtues that we would not want to lose in the process of significant change. These downsides and obstacles are not reason to rule out significant reorganization out of hand but they do suggest that we need careful consideration of the feasibility of this option.

Our Washington, DC Workshop

Over the course of this workshop, we propose to identify the various interdisciplinary efforts in both international relations and other disciplines, including those in the natural sciences, to determine what have been their successes and limitations with an eye toward ascertaining whether major change is even a real option and providing the beginnings of a blueprint for doing so.

June 3, 2019:

- Arrive NTL than 5 PM.
- Reception 6 to 7 PM.
- Dinner 7 to 8 PM.
- Keynote Address 8 to 9:30 PM. “The Social Purpose of the University: Are We Losing It?” Prof. Louise Richardson, Vice Chancellor, Oxford University*

June 4, 2019:

- Breakfast 8 to 8:30 AM.
- 8:30 to 9:00 AM: Welcoming remarks and overview [Michael Desch, Notre Dame and Stephen Van Evera, MIT].*
- 9 to 10:15 AM: Panel #1: The Challenges and Opportunities of Interdisciplinary/Non-disciplinary Program in the Modern Research University:

+ Professional Schools of International Affairs, James Steinberg, Maxwell School/Syracuse, chair.*

- + Medicine: Dr. Keith Meyer, Professor, School of Medicine, University of Wisconsin. *
- + Engineering: Richard Lanza, MIT.*
- + Neuro-science: Walter Wilczynski, Center for Behavioral Neuroscience, Georgia State University.*

- Break: 10:15 to 10:30 AM.

- 10:30 AM to 11:45 AM PM: Panel #2: The “Demand Side” for Interdisciplinary/Nondisciplinary Research.

- + Kathie Olsen, University of Notre Dame, Chair.*
- + NSF, Evan Heit, Division Director, Education and Human Resources*
- + NIH, Deputy and Acting Director, Dr. Nina Schor/NINDS.*
- + U.S. Navy, CAPT Geoffrey S. Gage, OPNAV N3N5*
- + Commercialization of universities, Bryan Ritchie, Notre Dame.*
- + In-Q-Tel, Matt Strottman.*

- 12:00 to 1:30 PM: Working lunch and Panel #3: Challenge Case Studies: Has the Pace of Science Outrun Our Ethical and Practical Frameworks:

- + Professor Stephen Van Evera, MIT, chair.
- + MG (r) Robert Latiff, USAF.*
- + Jason Matheny, Former IARPA Director*
- + Hank Greely, Stanford – Neuroscience.*

1:30 to 2:00 PM – Break.

2:00 to 3:00 PM: keynote: “Report of the Duke University Task Force on Tenure Standards,” Professor Bruce Jentleson, Co-chair.*

- 3 to 4:00 PM: Panel #4: The Perspective of Higher Education Leaders.

- + James Goldgeier, chair*
- + Jack Brennan, Chair, BOT, University of Notre Dame.*
- + Martin Jischke, Purdue.*
- + Daniel Myers, Provost, AU.*

- 4:00 to 4:30 PM: Panel #5: Lessons learned and next steps/strategies for Enhancing The University’s Social Purpose: [Michael Desch, Stephen Van Evera, and Francis Gavin]*