



1-1999

## **Against the Grain: The Natural History of an Inter-disciplinary Faculty Development Program**

Al Burstein  
*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

Neil Greenberg  
*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_ustudiespubs](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_ustudiespubs)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Burstein, Al and Greenberg, Neil, "Against the Grain: The Natural History of an Inter-disciplinary Faculty Development Program" (1999). *University Studies Interdisciplinary Publications*.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_ustudiespubs/8](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_ustudiespubs/8)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Studies at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Studies Interdisciplinary Publications by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).



**Seventh AAHE Conference on Faculty Roles & Rewards**

January 21-24, 1999 San Diego, CA

## **"The Academic Calling: Changing Commitments and Complexities"**

### **Against the Grain: The Natural History of an Inter-disciplinary Faculty Development Program.**

**Al Burstein and Neil Greenberg  
University of Tennessee  
University Studies Program**

**The union of the mathematician  
with the poet, fervor with measure,  
passion with correctness,  
this surely is the ideal.  
(William James)**

The twenty-five year history of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's **University Studies Program** illustrates the spontaneous, bottom up emergence of a very active and cost effective program. It is, in a manner of speaking, a guerrilla program in that it lives off the land, managing to survive and thrive without the usual perquisites of staff and space.

The session will consist of an historical account of the program over its twenty-five years of existence and will offer admittedly tentative conclusions about the nature of the program's successes and failures, and the ways in which the program's character and organization has contributed to those.

More specifically, the presentation will describe five major program activities:

- **COLLOQUIES:** ongoing meetings of faculty from different disciplines to pursue an interdisciplinary topic of common interest
- **CENTRIPETALS:** a monthly luncheon discussion series for the entire campus devoted to interdisciplinary topics
- **UNDERGRADUATE CLASSES:** Development of team taught interdisciplinary courses

- **UNDERGRADUATE CLASSES:** Development of team-taught interdisciplinary courses
- **CONFERENCES and SPEAKERS:** Sponsorship of distinguished visiting speakers and interdisciplinary conferences

Two threads tie these diverse activities together.

- The first is a belief in the notion that interdisciplinary involvement can play a uniquely important role in the development of a scholar;
- the second is that the purpose of the program is not to use money to lure faculty into unwelcome activities, but to provide resources that facilitate faculty in endeavors that they wish to pursue.

The presentation will conclude with an invitation for discussion about the "exportability" of the program and with some speculations about its future on our campus.

**Against the Grain,  
25 Years of Transdisciplinary Faculty Development:  
The University Studies Program at UTK**

Faculty development is one of those phrases that frequent use has worn smooth. Its meaning seems more and more assumed, less and less accessible to examination. Buried deep within the notion is an ambiguity about whether the goal ought to be that of fitting the individual to the institution or facilitating the individual's self-realization and vagueness about effective means for achieving the selected goal.

We will argue for faculty development as a means of facilitating the growth of individual faculty and for the importance in that regard of encouraging collegial relationships that reach across disciplinary lines. This is not a matter of institutionalizing an academic "perk:" To the extent that the purpose of higher education is to serve the goal of self-actualization — the fullest realization of human potential — as opposed to vocational training, in students it must be modeled by the faculty. This cannot occur in an atmosphere of isolation or stultifying boundaries. Finally, we will offer the University Studies program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville as exemplifying the practicality and utility of these views.

It should be recognized that these views seem at odds with what is current and emerging in the

academy. That recognition is embodied in the paper's title. There are two major challenges to the views proposed here. Each, as has already been hinted, is rooted in the ambiguities and uncertainties of a University's mission. The first is the degree to which academic advancement depends upon individual achievement in a specialist field; the second is the increasing use of part-time piece workers as teachers in higher education.

Despite the claims of writers like Edward O. Wilson and Jared Diamond, who see human knowledge as a convergent process, the intellectual project, shared by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, of producing an internally integrated body of knowledge assimilable by an individual mind has collapsed. Even though the ironies of the post-modern skeptics seem to be receding in popularity, the brute facts of high tech natural science research, the failure of the social sciences to evolve a dominant theory, and the fraying of the literary canon have yielded the endlessly branching academic tree familiar to us. Among the consequences for the university have been increasing uncertainty on the core elements of a general education and a campus populated by increasingly specialized colleges, departments and programs. In the contemporary community of scholars it is increasingly difficult for the intellectual merits of a particular classics scholar to be weighed against those of a particular physicist or sociologist, unless one resorts to the universal coinage of attracting external funding or makes the flawed assumption that all lines on any curriculum vitae weigh the same. This situation is exacerbated by the contraction, after decades of expansion, of public financial support for higher education. With necessarily self-interested departments competing for shrinking resources, promotion and tenure have become increasingly dependant on reputation among similar specialists on other campuses (and therefore disinterested) as opposed to competing campus colleagues with unshared specialist skills. The role of offers of employment from other campuses -- offers almost entirely generated on the basis of specialist publication, in garnering promotion and, even in an austere fiscal climate, raises -- is also clear, if less often made explicit.

Hence the image of the university as a community of scholars engaged in intellectual colloquy recedes in favor of the image of individual specialists, motivated to write for a specialist audience elsewhere, talking to campus colleagues, if they talk to them at all, about parking problems. David Damrosch argues that what perpetuates this situation is the nature of graduate training, focused on the doctoral dissertation as the product of isolated and individual effort, unfruitfully isolated from the role played by colloquy in intellectual vigor and excitement. The recent award of a half million dollar grant by the Pew Charitable Trusts to Jody Nyquist, at the Washington University for the evaluation of doctoral training reflects similar concerns (APA Monitor, 1/99, p. 10).

Be that as it may, the dominance of the academic as specialist is clear, and it also seems that intellectual alienation from campus colleagues has been fed by the recent and continuing contraction of resources for higher education and the socio-political structure of the campus. Damrosch and Nyquist are looking at the shape of doctoral training, not at the structure of the campus, though the two would appear necessarily related. Perhaps the most radical attack on the

campus, though the two would appear necessarily related. Perhaps the most radical attack on the structure of the university is the emergence of for-profit campuses on which teachers are hired as pieceworkers rather than as members of an arguably fictitious community of scholars. Such institutions, basically education factories or markets, selling courses to individual students or corporations, employing teachers as workers to deliver a standardized product are currently proliferating. Even on what might be called traditional campuses, more and more teaching is being done by graduate student or non-tenure track piece workers producing credit hours at low cost while tenured faculty teach fewer courses and increasingly focus on research, publication and grant procurement. Thus a divide develops, not just between scholarly specialists, but between the piece work and full-time faculty.

All this seems a long way from John Henry Newman's idea of a university centered on the cultivation of intellect, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. That idea seems more quaint than relevant to the current reality of universities with multiple goals of general education, vocational training, highly specialized applied and basic research beset by the painful realities of diminished funding. The grimmest thought is that the growth by opportunistic accretion of the multiversity has reached its limit and that, lacking a heart, the golem is reeling toward collapse.

Our argument is that, despite all we have seen and said, the university does have a heart, and that heart is precisely the goal Newman articulated. Many of the multiple functions that the multiversity performs could be carried out, and carried out well elsewhere, as educational factories and research institutes demonstrate. For Newman what is essential to the university is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but not specialized knowledge in isolation. What constitutes the university is the *community* of scholars discoursing across specializations. Note his description, "An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought...to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects.... They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought....A habit of mind is formed which lasts throughout life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom...a philosophical habit" (p 76 U of Notre Dame Press 1982). We are arguing from Newman that a valuable, even precious aspect of faculty development is cultivating colloquy by individuals across disciplines, that in that cultivation we nourish the heart of the university.

To summarize and simplify, Newman argues that the essence of a university is bringing together the fullest possible range of specialist scholars and facilitating colloquy. He argues that where this is done perspective and reflection enrich the work of each and create an inimitable learning climate benefitting both faculty and students.

In what follows we will describe how these lofty goals are being pursued on a small but significant scale on our campus.

The name of the program is University Studies. It came into being twenty-five years ago when a sociologist in a course lecture attended by some engineering students called into question the contributions of technology to civilization. After class, one of the engineering students said basically, "You wouldn't say that if one of *our* faculty were here." The professor accepted the challenge and a couple of joint classes ensued. From that chance exchange and the conversations that followed the notion evolved of developing a team-taught interdisciplinary series of courses exploring the issue of technology and society with the first course focused on the impact of the automobile on American society. The team teaching the first course was a dozen strong and included a wide range of fields. Because of its interdisciplinary nature the course was assigned a non-departmental title: University Studies 3010. The course involved large weekly lectures and small discussion groups; the faculty involved received no extra compensation for their involvement. The team teaching the course came to enjoy the interdisciplinary exchange in their planning sessions, and their meetings became an end in itself; the group came to call its meetings the Colloquy on Technology and Society.

In the years that followed, other faculty colloquies emerged: The Appalachian Forum, The Interdisciplinary Colloquy on Rhetoric, The Diversity Colloquy, and more recently, colloquies on Psychoanalysis and the Humanities, Critical Thinking, Creativity and Evolution. University Studies became not just the title of a course but a program of facilitating interdisciplinary faculty colloquy. Thus the colloquies have become the distinguishing feature of a University Studies program which facilitates the meetings of each of the groups, providing small funding for duplicating costs, support for an occasional visiting speaker, and the like. The colloquies vary in size from a half dozen to thirty faculty and in their level of activity. The mother colloquy, Technology and Society, is currently inactive; the others meet on an ongoing basis to pursue their various interests. It is crucial to keep in mind that the colloquies arise spontaneously; they are welcomed by the program but not planned by it. The mechanism for initiating a new colloquy is simple. A group of faculty notifies the program chair of their intent to begin meeting and of the nature of support that the meeting would entail. Information about current colloquies is disseminated on campus via a web based brochure.

As might be expected in an educational institution, the University Studies program achieved institutional life, as it were, by offering a course that belonged nowhere else in the university. Over the years, the program has offered many other courses, often serving as a kind of laboratory or studio for the development of interdisciplinary offerings to students. Most such courses have been the product of one of the colloquies; sometime they are offered only once or twice. Such was the case with courses titled Ethics and the Professions, Critical Thinking and Narrative Knowledge. Other courses have acquired a life of their own and are offered regularly: Art and Organism; Technology and Society; Aids and Society, and War and Remembrance. Because these courses are not required by any departmental constituency, but arise out of faculty interest in teaching them, the program's stance is to avoid establishing a pay scale for them; rather the question is, "In what

way can University Studies help make the course you want to offer possible?" Sometimes that involves extra-service pay; sometimes funding a graduate assistant; sometimes transferring funds to a department; sometimes simply footing the bill for duplicating costs. The net result of the program's providing a mechanism for offering courses the faculty want to teach is that the cost per credit hour is the lowest at the university...but the courses meet no extrinsic university need other than encouraging interdisciplinary conversation. The mechanism for offering new courses is simple. They are offered as "special topics" courses after approval by the program chair. Information about current courses is disseminated on campus via fliers, the university time table and the web based program brochure.

A third important activity sponsored by the program is the monthly luncheon series at which distinguished faculty present on some topic of interest to an interdisciplinary audience. Attendance is by advance subscription; the audience buys its own lunch. Attendance varies from thirty to over a hundred, depending on the topic and the presenter. The series, now in its sixteenth year, is called Centripetals. Lunch is served promptly at noon; the speaker is introduced promptly at 12:30 and speaks until exactly 1PM, leaving twenty minutes for question and comment, which is often quite spirited.

The University Studies program also joins with other elements on the campus in supporting visitors and conferences of interdisciplinary interest. It cosponsored a series of three conferences on Values in Higher Education, contributes to a yearly conference on Rhetoric, and each year contributes to the support of perhaps a half dozen visiting speakers. The program has become known as a resource to which faculty can turn for easily obtained but modest support for any interdisciplinary effort.

Finally, the program organizes a yearly two-day retreat at an off-campus university facility. All faculty who are involved in any aspect of the program are welcome. Typically twenty to forty faculty attend. At the retreat the year's activities are reviewed and plans made for the coming year. An award of \$5000 for contributions to interdisciplinary scholarship is made, and the previous year's awardee reads a paper. The meeting is marked by a high level of fellowship and exchange, often long into the night.

The total program budget is less than \$40,000; The only administrative expense is part-time secretarial support provided by the Academic Affairs Office.

In a way, the University Studies program is at constant risk, especially in times of financial exigency. Many department chairs regard the program as a frivolity dissipating the energies of faculty that could be more profitably be invested in departmental affairs. Paradoxically, the program could only exist because departmental specialization fails to provide the excitement and stimulation of close intellectual engagement with fellow faculty who challenge one's assumptions.

Perhaps the best evidence for the program's effectiveness is that it continues to thrive, even in an austere fiscal climate. It continues to thrive because the faculty who participate in it are vocal in their enthusiasm, because it has acquired the reputation of being productive and valuable by highly placed campus administrators, and because it is cheap.



## **THE UNIVERSITY STUDIES PROGRAM**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE**

**440 COMMUNICATIONS BUILDING**

**KNOXVILLE, TN, 37996-0349**

**423-974-9915**

**<http://web.utk.edu/~unistudy/>**

**Email: [ngreenbe@utk.edu](mailto:ngreenbe@utk.edu)**