The Organizational Paradox

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Words are deeply revealing. The spirit of the College, as well as that of others that took life at the same time—Ramapo, Evergreen, Hampshire—was expressed in a particular language. "Innovative," "traditional," "relevant," "experimental"—each word had special and magical meanings. This language contained incantations—various forms of hope—and curses—various forms of fear—often held and expressed by the same people. We who joined the College at the outset were part of an elite that dared not speak its name.

It is important to recollect that those days were at the end of what David Reisman and Christopher Jencks, tellingly, called "the academic revolution." From the end of the Second World War until 1970, the period of the Cold War, had been a period of expansion in American higher education. Great wealth had been poured into colleges and universities. Numbers flooded into these institutions. Faculty shaped disciplines in new ways and developed new forms in such fields as area studies and urban studies. Graduate departments produced graduate students in vast numbers. It was a great age of optimism. People had hoped that the hump of that academic revolution could be feasted on to produce even greater advances. But that period of expansion and wealth had been exceptional in the history of American higher education, and Stockton and other "innovative" colleges were founded in a period that would witness the return to normalcy with limited resources and limited opportunities.

An age that considered itself marked by the end of ideology produced an age marked by ideologies. The optimism that shaped the founding of these colleges, therefore, masked a dark side because the academic revolution had contained within it the seeds of its own destruction. It is another irony that the iconic texts of the new generation—books by Kuhn, de Man, White, Rorty, Geertz, and Fish—emerged from pens (and they probably were pens) from white (male) writers who were a part of the academic revolution. Great wealth and vast numbers sometimes created a spirit of alienation among the very people who benefited from this great expansion. Gender studies, perhaps the most important and powerful impulse of the time, was beginning to reveal the inadequacies of curricular innovations. The authority of departments, the bulwark of the revolution, now became an object of distrust. And then there was the Vietnam War. It is impossible to overestimate the role of the war in shaping attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s. It is fair to say that many students and faculty fled to institutions of higher education precisely to escape Vietnam. As a consequence they did not share the values of those who in the 1940s and 1950s created the academic revolution. Stockton and other colleges were founded by those who distrusted the institutions from which they came and the political system that produced a war they detested.

Our founders, like faculty in other institutions, sometimes carried resentments from their graduate training, and they hoped, therefore, to convert institutions of higher education into agents of criticism. That is why words like "relevant" and "interdisciplinary" took on their magical meanings and had such a powerful hold on those who used them. They were devices to create new systems of loyalty and belonging. They also broke down alternative systems of loyalty: to intellectual disciplines, to other institutions, to other associations, such as the family and community.

It was a period of tremendous creativity. This shift from the academic revolution of the 1940s and 1950s to the "innovative," "interdisciplinary" institutions of the 1970s produced a vacuum that was filled by many good things—in particular a different view of general education and a different view of what disciplines should look like. As the advertisement summoning applications for the first faculty shows, the language of our founding fathers (and they were all men) contained the ambiguities and uncertainties of the time. The humanities, for example, would consist of programs that would "break away from traditional rationales and conventional methods." Notice the distinctly odd positioning of "methods" at the end of this formulation. And the social sciences would develop new "interdisciplinary methods" to produce a "horizontal integration" to "complement" the "customary vertical integration of the departmental major." Notice the placing of the word "customary." There was no anticipation in reticulated language such as this that institutions like Stockton could sustain the emergence of knowledge formations as we now know them, formations that defy flat planes. What we call knowledge does not come together in ninety-degree angles. The natural sciences sought "innovative and experimental individuals" who would, at the same time have "expertise" in one of a list of standard disciplinary fields. The upshot was that this internally conflicted program of action actually produced an amazingly disparate group of intellectual (ad)ventures.

It also created what an historian of the Department of Social Relations at Harvard called an organizational paradox: without some sort of theoretical closure these programs had only a negative ideal—what they were not; however, efforts to achieve some kind of closure were regarded as "traditional" and authoritarian.

Therefore, the vacuum was also filled by structural characteristics of dubious value: innovations often became ossified into new traditions. Students became consumers whose demand had to be met by new markets. With the authority of departments gone, a managerial regime emerged to organize (and control) hitherto more autonomous practices. The advertisement for the humanities noted pretty uneasily that the "faculties would work closely with the Chairman" in the development of their programs. It is a way of speaking that discloses the possibilities of suspicion and distrust. A Middle States official once told me that the organization's proudest achievement was the professionalization of administrators. In an odd way these many good things produced a kind of complacency and self-satisfaction, a kind of isolation, a curious kind of twentieth-century parochialism.

Stockton, Ramapo, Evergreen, and Hampshire are a part of a uniquely twentieth-century phenomenon. I suppose the lesson to be learned from this is to be skeptical, especially about those things one loves the best. Zhou Enlai, the Foreign Minister of China under Chairman Mao, once asked Mao about the significance of the French Revolution. Mao responded that it is too early to tell. So it is.

Mezuzahs

The campus was not ready until January 1972, and we held our first semester in the bankrupt Mayflower Hotel on the Boardwalk by Tennessee Avenue, formerly a Jewish hotel with Mezuzahs on the doorpost of each room. Faculty offices were the hotel bedrooms, with two faculty members to each room.

Suicidal Chipmunks

I had conducted research on rats as a hobby at graduate school (while I did my dissertation on suicide), but I thought it would be fun to have my students work with chipmunks. My Dean bullied the staff to find room for my chipmunks in the hotel. After much protesting, the Dean got a call from Ken Stow who told him that he had finally found a place to house my chimpanzees! Ken was very relieved to find out he had misheard the request. So, my office-mate, Adrian Jaffe, in ARHU had to adjust to a cage of chipmunks in our hotel room. Unfortunately, they escaped one day. One got out of the window and fell several stories to the road below, and the sad news circulated that one of my chipmunks had committed suicide!

Tuneful Grades

There was a great deal of humor in the early days. One plan was to have no Office of Student Records. Students would keep their own transcripts and carry them around. One professor suggested facetiously in a memo that grades be assigned musical notes and tempos. After each course, we would sing the grade to each student, and then students could sing their whole transcript to their advisors. (We had high pass, satisfactory and no credit grades in the early days.)

Registration

In the early days, faculty members were in charge of registration. We sat at tables and handed out IBM cards for the courses directly to students. If there was a demand for a particular course, we cut more cards or added sections. If one instructor's course was not attracting enough students, we would persuade students to sign up for the course (so that the course would not be cancelled) and then drop-add in the first week, and we promised them their preferred course.

Majors

A student could come to Stockton, reject all of our majors and courses and design 32 courses of their own choosing for their own major. One of my preceptees majored in parapsychology. Another student wanted to study exosociology. Exobiology is the study of whether there is life on other planets. He knew that there was, and he wanted to study the social organization of the life forms up there. (His proposal was rejected.)

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