

Wong's classic
essay that
started "the
conversation"

THE UGLY DUCKLING OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Presented at the University of the Pacific

March 30, 1990

by

Frank F. Wong

Vice President for Academic Affairs

University of Redlands

Once upon a time there was a higher education specie that taxonomists did not know how to classify. Like the ugly duckling of the fable, it resembled a duck but didn't quite make it as a duck. It resembled a goose, but other geese were quick to disown it. Mostly, it resembled Rodney Dangerfield, because it just never got any respect.

Then a wealthy and presumably wise organization, the Carnegie Foundation, decided that this specie had to be called something so it came up with the name of the "comprehensive university." Now this name explained pretty much next to nothing, and it was almost worse than having no name at all. "Comprehensive" can mean "totally inclusive" or it can mean "comprehensible." No institution of higher education can seriously claim to be totally inclusive in this day of endlessly developing knowledge, so the name itself makes the institution incomprehensible. This classification is clearly an oxymoron. Carnegie might as well have called these institutions "miscellaneous universities" or "unclassified, origins unknown universities." Like interdisciplinary subjects that don't fit neatly into the established classifications of academic disciplines, they are orphans in the conventional class society of academe.

Why do those of us at places like the University of the Pacific and the University of Redlands have this orphan syndrome? When I arrived at Redlands two and a half years ago, faculty members would frequently comment on the "identity problem" at the university. A significant number of faculty wanted to pursue the Pomona prototype. A smaller number wished that we were more like Stanford where professional and graduate schools set the tone and dominate the budget. Still others wanted Redlands to be like Hampshire or Evergreen, overtly unconventional and self consciously progressive. One did not have to look far for the source of the identity problem. There was no definitive model of the comprehensive university. And somehow, the models that existed, those that faculty intuitively turn to, were a poor fit for the assemblage of activities and dynamics that are found at the comprehensive university. Because that specie of institution is so poorly defined and ill understood, those of us at such universities need to create their meaning and interpret their significance.

How does one begin to conceptualize the significance of the comprehensive university? It is useful to begin with the prototypes from which its primary parts are derived -- the undergraduate liberal arts college on the one hand and the research university with graduate and professional school emphasis on the other. Each has its own separate historical origin.

The liberal arts college comes to us primarily out of the English tradition via Oxford and Cambridge. The research university comes to us out of the German university tradition. In America, just as different ethnic groups have been intermixed in ways not found in other parts of the world, so the elements of these two different educational traditions have been intermixed in a variety of different ways, notwithstanding the fact that particular educators and particular educational institutions will claim the purity or the predominance of the one tradition or the other. (Just as ethnic groups will sometimes try to recover the purity of their separate traditions, sometimes by disparaging other ethnic groups.)

These two different higher education prototypes can be compared and contrasted in many different ways, but for purposes of understanding the peculiar nature of the comprehensive university, let me select three characteristics of these prototypes. These characteristics are not necessarily descriptive of what exists at institutions within these classifications but they are what people think should exist at such institutions; they are what might be called the mythologies of these prototypes. They are the kind of institutional self descriptions that one finds in mission statements, catalogue copy, and accreditation self studies -- and they are mythologies not so much because they are hypocritical or untrue but because they are aspirational, what the institution strives for even if it is not fully realized.

In the liberal arts prototype there is first an emphasis upon personal teaching. This is reflected in a number of different ways. There is an assumption that small classes which permit some sense of personal relationship between student and teacher are critical for effective pedagogy. In addition, there is a belief, often implied, that the personal development of the student in terms of character and responsibility, is as important if not more important than the development of intellectual skills. Student involved learning, organized residential life and extracurricular activities, teaching the best thoughts of the best minds of the past, are all sanctified by this belief. The transmission of traditional knowledge plays an important role in this vision of higher education.

A second characteristic of the liberal arts prototype is the belief that intellectual community and curricular coherence are important measures of effective education. The recent movement in higher education, beginning with Harvard's new core curriculum in the late '70s and succinctly expressed in Ernest Boyer's Carnegie Foundation study entitled, College: The Undergraduate Experience, expresses the reaffirmation of the liberal arts tradition. It is important to recall that the English liberal arts tradition predates the Germanic research tradition and in many ways, as we shall see, is incompatible with that more recent tradition. Intellectual community and curricular coherence implies a faculty with common intellectual concerns and a shared sense of curricular purpose. These aspirations are in some ways a natural corollary to the belief in the importance of personal teaching: healthy personal development requires participation in a community, and a sense of wholeness in life requires a perspective that integrates and connects the disparate parts of learning.

A third characteristic of the liberal arts prototype is the belief that learning exists for its own sake. The reason for being of a quality college is to turn students on to the joy and the

excitement of learning, to enjoy the life of the mind, to cultivate the nobler aspects of human existence, as they might have said in the nineteenth century. Students study philosophy, history, literature, psychology, biology, economics, and physics because the activity is good, and good for them, not because that study will lead them to a job, or to the solution of any practical problems like how to balance your check book or how to control your teen age children. It is this belief that leads to disparagement of applied or utilitarian learning and generally makes second class citizens of departments of education, business, or engineering, where they exist in a liberal arts environment. Of course in the elite liberal arts colleges, in the name of the purity of this belief, they are not allowed to exist at all.

Not surprising, the characteristics of the research university prototype contrast sharply if not implicitly contradict those of the liberal arts college. To begin with, research takes precedence over teaching, and the emphasis is on the generation of new knowledge rather than the transmission of old knowledge. Faculty are rewarded and recognized by how well they know their subject (usually measured by how much they have published) rather than by how well they teach the subject to students. The research university prototype does not hold the personal development of the student as a primary goal. Undergraduate classes of several hundred students where the actual teaching (as opposed to lecturing) is done by overworked and underpaid graduate students do not lend themselves to a concern for character development. But of course it is these institutions that produce major advances in knowledge and Nobel laureates.

As a result of this research orientation, this prototype exalts professionalism and as a consequence emphasizes graduate education over undergraduate education. The inevitable outcome of this emphasis is specialization and compartmentalization. In contrast with the liberal arts prototype, there is no aspiration for a university community and no pretence that knowledge can be organized in some integrated or connected way. There are only autonomous and separate communities defined by academic disciplines, and while research sometimes crosses those boundaries, the politics and organization of such institutions does not readily encourage a common discourse across the baronies of academic departments. In this environment, competence is more important than character, and that is normally achieved by exclusive study of a limited area rather than by generalized study of many broad areas. The nature of contemporary knowledge (if not of contemporary society) requires high levels of specialization in order to achieve competence, and the consequent erosion of any real sense of community is obvious on most college and university campuses across the country.

If two of the contrasting characteristics of the research university prototype are research and professionalism, the third follows logically from them. Professionalism implies training for the professions and that in turn implies utilitarian or applied learning. There is a practical objective to learning. It does secure a job for you and at least some of what you learn can be applied to earning a living. Of course, there are some tensions between pure research for the sake of developing new knowledge and applied research for the development of new patents but in our research universities, perhaps because of the uniquely American approach

of establishing land grant universities which serve the practical needs of the states, the line between these two types of research sometimes becomes very thin. As research has become increasingly funded by government and foundations, the attainment of practical results has become increasingly more important than the production of new, but not necessarily useful, knowledge. The joy of learning for its own sake has yielded to need to apply successfully for the next research grant. By now it may be evident that these prototypes are somewhat artificial constructs and they do not generally exist in their pure form except in some Platonic world of our minds. But precisely because they exist so much in minds of academicians, they tend to mold the way we think, the world of facts notwithstanding. Although Stanford is clearly a research university, they have invested enormous resources in the student development and residential education area out of concern that their research oriented faculty gave insufficient care and attention to students. Now as they try to pare \$22,000,000 from their budget, there is intense discussion about whether or not they can do both with equal quality. Pomona is clearly a liberal arts college, but the current faculty debate on campus is whether they should reduce the annual teaching load from five courses to four courses so that faculty can do competitive research with their counterparts at Stanford. The President of Pomona has advised the faculty that if their teaching loads are reduced, they must increase their book publications. Upon close examination, our prototypical models are not so pure after all, although in this aspect, their lack of purity, they may be more typical than has been commonly recognized.

Indeed, despite the rhetoric surrounding these prototypes and the often-heated arguments that pit one against the other in the name of someone's view of integrity, there has been fundamental intermixing of the two types in most colleges and universities. At most quality liberal arts colleges the academic departments, the academic programs, and general faculty attitudes have been "professionalized" in the sense that they are specialized, primarily value competence in a particular discipline, do not share a common vision of the curriculum, and are built on assumptions of separatism and autonomy of departments. At most quality research universities there is at least the claim of concern for undergraduate education and the personal development of students. At places like Stanford and Harvard there have been well-publicized faculty debates about what should be commonly required of undergraduate students. What is interesting about this blurring of types, this blending of liberal arts college and research university characteristics at the top rank institutions is that you do not hear about identity problems at such places even though in their own way they are mucking around in the same swampy issues that afflict the comprehensive universities.

Another way to put it is that comprehensive universities, in their identity struggles, may be wrestling with fundamental, unresolved contradictions in American higher education that are the result of the dual inheritance of the English and Germanic traditions. Why then do we have this ugly duckling complex when we reflect upon ourselves? Perhaps the answer lies in a comment made to me recently by the President of an important educational foundation. "Comprehensive universities," he said, "are basically no more than the accidental combination of many different parts that have developed with no organic purpose. I do not know of any that have consciously tried to make educational use of their combination of

programs. They occupy the same space but there is no effort to have one deliberately influence the other. Comprehensive universities are no more than the sum of their parts; nothing is added by the parts being together."

Too often those of us in comprehensive universities have viewed our mixed origins as somewhat disreputable, as if our lineage was somehow illegitimate for not being in the same class as the better-known families of higher education. But there may be another way of looking at those mixed origins. If one makes deliberate use of the mixture, if one uses and advances the mix to improve the educational product, perhaps the comprehensive university can become a superior hybrid strain of higher education rather than the bastard orphan that is left out in the cold.

What is the particular mix that we should be looking for and what are the educational issues with which we should be concerned? Here I think we need a broader and deeper vision of what we should be about, a concern that goes beyond the professional, pedagogical, and prestige concerns of academe. The contradiction represented by the cleavage between the liberal arts ideal and the research university ideal is in some ways emblematic of a broader issue in our contemporary society. This issue is described in Robert Persig's maverick book, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, which has much to say about both modern life and higher education. At one point in the book, the narrator reflects upon the significance of a mechanic who carelessly shears a pin while trying to repair the motorcycle. The problem, says the narrator, is that these days what people do for a living is entirely separated from what they are as people. The mechanic, like so many other people, has no basic human identification with his work, no genuine enthusiasm for what he is doing. The human spirit, "the search for quality," in Persig's words, must ultimately return us to our everyday life and work, so that life and work are infused with a romantic quest, a "gumption" (an old-fashioned American word in which he infuses a Zen Buddhist spirit) that overcomes our inner schisms and our daily frustrations.

The schism in higher education between the liberal arts ideal and the training for work in the professions, that contradiction that defines the comprehensive university, is the educational expression of Persig's modern malaise. Liberal education is concerned with developing intellect and character of students -- what they are while professional education is concerned with what they do. This is the problem that becomes the opportunity for our kind of university. Can we find ways to convert the tensions between these two educational prototypes into some creative synergy? Indeed, are the tensions real or are they artificial results of battles over academic turf? As we noted earlier, there are no obvious models of how you best address these issues in the setting of a university, because the territory is often avoided and it is relatively unexplored. What might the terrain look like if we were to venture into it?

If a university structured itself to reconcile the tensions between teaching and research, perhaps research would be redefined so that its object would not be just the creation of new knowledge but the renewal of fresh teaching and the more integrated transmission of

increasingly fragmented knowledge. Rather than publishing arcane research in the remote, specialized edges of academic disciplines, faculty might publish more interpretive essays that translate the new research of other scholars into a more integrated vision of learning that embodies deliberately humane purposes. If a university addressed the tensions between general education and specialized education, it might develop a structure in which faculty would be expected to have a dual allegiance to both their academic disciplines and the common purposes of a core curriculum. It might even go so far as to evaluate and reward faculty in terms of their effectiveness in both areas. Interdepartmental collegiality would be a necessary basis for finding coherence and community in the midst of the fragmenting forces of departmental specialization and autonomy. If a university struggled with the presumed tensions between learning for its own sake and applied learning for the solution of practical problems, it might discover that the dichotomy is more apparent than real. If a teacher instills in a student a zest for learning, why can't that enthusiasm be transferred with benefit to professional training and practical knowledge. Perhaps the academy has been too long imprisoned in Plato's idealism that defines truth as something apart from the practical world of our senses. But neither William James nor John Dewey found a contradiction between what we learned from practical experience and whatever theoretical truth we might discover. Perhaps we should look more to these philosophers nourished by our American environment and less to those of ancient Greece. To find the dialectical relationship that crosses the apparent differences is another way of expressing the sought-after union of what we are with what we do described by Persig.

Perhaps if we in the comprehensive universities were to self-consciously pursue this agenda, our search for identity might become a search of discovery. We might indeed build an institution that is more than the sum of its parts, that has taken its parts and created an organic entity that is defined by the special relationship of its parts. If all this were to happen, there might be a proverbial fairy tale ending -- the ugly duckling would turn out to be the beautiful swan and would become the envy of ducks and geese alike.