

THE IDEA OF OUR UNIVERSITY 2. MAKING IT REAL

In an earlier white paper on “the idea of our university,” I suggested that what CU needs more than anything else is a compelling picture of the campus’s fundamental mission and identity as a major public research institution. I went on to argue that the core theme of such a picture should be a clear definition of a liberal arts education, and that the foundation of a liberal arts education is the humanities. For it is above all in the humanities that both students and faculty engage in the work of critical reasoning, close analysis, and precise interpretation—in a word, the work of *reading*—required to make deeper and more perspicuous sense of everything else human beings undertake in their efforts to understand both their own experience and the natural and social worlds to which that experience belongs.

In this new paper, I want to present some thoughts about what concrete steps might be taken to realize this goal.

1. A common campus mission

A first step would be to define the common campus mission. The guiding idea here is borrowed from the recent creation of the College of Media, Communication, and Information (CMCI). It’s not clear how successful CMCI has been in adopting the model—as we all know, change comes hard in a university. However, at its inception, the new college offered the chance to escape the all-too familiar trap of academic overspecialization, an escape possible just because the college was brand new.

Comparison with the College of Arts and Sciences is useful here. Like all long-established colleges, A&S grew up from its constituent departments. In the beginning was English and Chemistry, Sociology and Psychology, Economics and Ethnic Studies. And as the size and number of these departments grew, an ever larger central administration was superadded in an effort to impose order on the centrifugal energies thus unleashed. The result is the essentially feudal model we know so well, in which an imperfectly sovereign dean labors to regulate the activities of the departmental barons in her care—barons more often than not engaged in competition with their neighbors for the resources to which all of them contribute in the form of tuition and external research dollars and yet for which all depend for their survival and growth. Whence the emergence of so-called “entrepreneurial” chairs intent on devising ever more ingenious ways of extracting a maximum share for their own units in the zero-sum game called “budget allocation.”

By contrast, in CMCI, the fact that departments were coeval with the college as a whole promised a new model. Instead of building the college *up* from its departments, the aim was to build it *out* from the college’s shared mission. Not only did this model sidestep the sort of feudal competition A&S routinely experiences; it offered the opportunity to think again about what a college should look like. Is college policy-making some version of King John’s clash with the Barons at Runnymede, drawing up Magna Carta in an effort to lay out principles of unity for autonomous overlords as intent on shoving each other aside as their monarch? Or to update the analogy, is college governance a Game of Thrones in which each participant’s gain comes at the

expense of somebody else? Is it in fact the case that, as Cersei Lannister puts it, “You win the game, or die,” or should policy flow from whatever it is we agree defines the identity of the college at large?

In CMCI’s case, the decision was that the whole should determine the shape of the parts as an expression of everything that brought the parts together to form, precisely, a *whole*; and the key to grasping that whole was to ask who CMCI’s faculty and students were, what common purpose they pursued, and so how building a single college for them at once drew on and advanced their diverse projects and interests. It was accordingly acknowledged that, to ply their trade in the new world of big data and social media, journalists, for instance, need to acquire serious skills in information science and media production. Meanwhile, scientists need to acquire design and communication skills most fully developed by media theorists, public relations strategists, and journalists. The idea, then, was that the college formed an elaborate Venn diagram around a common set of aims, problems, practices, and concerns. Departments were thus designed simultaneously to draw from and nourish each other at every point.

What was at least in theory true of CMCI could also be true of A&S and indeed of the campus. Needless to say, given the size, complexity, and disciplinary variety that characterize A&S and our current system of separate schools and colleges, defining a common mission will be hard. But hard doesn’t mean impossible. The trick is to ask what it is engineers do, for example, that matters to everybody else, and what it is engineers in turn need to learn from other disciplines. Engineers do of course already put such questions to themselves where natural science is concerned, just as natural scientists routinely borrow from and collaborate with faculty and students in other fields—biology, after all, is a shared concern of EBIO, MCDB, IPHY, and Biochemistry as well as Bio Frontiers. However, as recent efforts to work on campus ethics remind us, engineering or natural science are ethical as well as technical pursuits—forms of life that inhabit still other forms of life in a whole to which all of us belong, and that all of us help shape, even if our academic specializations often make it hard to see it.

2. A common campus Core program

As I’ve confessed, forging the kind of unity I have in mind will be a challenge. However, we already possess an instrument that could make the task easier: the Core program. To be sure, A&S has recently replaced its Core with a new General Education requirement—a step I personally believe to be a mistake in that it encourages us to think that non-majors will learn all they need to about a given discipline simply by taking a prescribed number of courses in it. Properly considered, though, a Core as opposed to a Gen Ed program focuses on non-specialists and aims to convey a given discipline’s underlying ethos and *raison d’être*. As I’ve put it in another white paper, a proper Core course isn’t *in* a field; it’s *about* it. The question we should ask ourselves becomes, what is it about literary study, say, or chemistry or sociology or statistics that students in general, non-majors as well as majors, ought to understand in order to see not only the kind of thing literary critics, chemists, sociologists, or statisticians do, and why, but also how those activities fit into a broader picture of both the university and the world. In addition, to my mind at least, such courses should be taught by tenure-line faculty rather than farmed out to instructors, adjuncts, or teaching assistants. It’s important that students consult the source rather than accredited substitutes, good as those substitutes are. For, again, the goal is to teach both

what and why, and even what it all means, something our greatest practitioners can do far better than anyone else.

But I hope, in joining me in imagining what a campus Core might look like, you already sense how it relates to the ideal of the liberal arts, and so too of the arts and humanities. As I argued in my earlier white paper on the idea of our university, the arts and humanities are about everyone and everything precisely because they're about how human beings make human sense of themselves and of the natural and social universe they inhabit. A proper Core course on physics, then, would, as I see it, already approach the ideal of an arts and humanities course in that it would convey to non-majors how physicists do now, have in the past, and may yet in future make sense of the world. For physicists too are human beings, and their interests and practices express our shared humanity as integrally as painting or theater or literature or philosophical argument do. As I've noted elsewhere, the system of autarchic disciplines we've constructed since the later 18th century in constructing the modern university enshrined an idea that was wholly foreign to the ancients, the Middle Ages, and their early modern descendants. A critical step in the scientific revolution of 17th-century Europe that gave us modern natural science was recognition of what Isaac Newton and others demonstrated to be the fundamental unity of nature—Newton's apple falls in the same way as the Moon gravitates around the Earth because both phenomena obey the same physical laws. What a campus Core would enable us to explore is the far greater unity of human knowledge and creativity in general.

3. Interdisciplinarity

A campus Core would benefit from incorporation of an increasingly striking and significant feature of contemporary scholarship, research, and creative work: their growing interdisciplinarity. The campus Core as I imagine it already pushes in this direction. But it would do so all the more integrally if it encouraged the kind of cross-disciplinary team-teaching many of our colleagues struggle to pursue even within their own fields of expertise.

We all know what the main obstacles to team-teaching are: the way college and departmental budgets lean on Student Credit Hour production at the level of individual units; the rules governing the distribution of SCH and accompanying rewards for effort; the fact that the rubrics under which we organize offerings in our course catalogs compel us to describe courses in departmental rather than in broader, non- and cross-disciplinary terms, as FREN this or CHEM that or ANTH something else again. Indeed, an easy step the university could take to promote team-teaching would be to create broader rubrics—AHUM, NSCI, SSCI, etc.—and then encourage departments to allot some of their major requirements to one or another of these headings. All of our current modes of budget allocation and accounting entrench the kind of feudal competition we need to eliminate if we are to create a genuinely common culture because they oblige individual programs and departments to define themselves in more-or-less open opposition to each other.

Nevertheless, as the daily experience of our colleagues amply attests, this sort of disciplinary isolation runs directly counter to what makes our work valuable and interesting. I have for many years now found it impossible to teach even the work of a single author like the great comic dramatist Molière without engaging with art history, theater history, philosophy in both its

“natural” and “moral” modes, not to mention soundings in politics, “political economy,” and the general history of French social as well as literary conventions and institutions. One of the many benefits of turning our collective energies to articulating the essential unity of our scholarly, scientific, and creative pursuits would accordingly be fresh incentives to remove the impediments to the cross-disciplinary work we already do, fostering a greater spirit of collaboration that would in turn reinforce commitment to our common enterprise.

And what would be the result if not the opportunity to forge what CU lacks more than anything: the shared identity needed to give the “Be Boulder” slogan real substance?