

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Section 2

May 17, 1989

OPINION

The Great Questions of Science and Society Do Not Fit Neatly Into Single Disciplines

By Robert W. Kates

THE BASIC STRUCTURE of the modern university is clear—a trinity of students, graduate and undergraduate; administrators, from president to department chairs; faculty members, divided into departments and divisions. But there is another structure that is less transparent, too new to be familiar, and poorly understood.

It is the collage of centers, programs, and institutes that dot our campuses and complicate our academic directories. Brown University has 35 such academic entities (compared with 40 departments or divisions), as well as an additional 10 important non-academic centers undertaking research, policy study, or artistic performance.

The alphabetical list of academic centers and institutes begins with advanced materials and Afro-American studies and ends with visual arts and world hunger.

Maurice Glicksman, the provost at Brown, has compiled the recent history of the centers and institutes and has found that of the 35, only 10 were created before 1977, whereas 15 were organized in the last five years. In addition, four others have disappeared and four have evolved into departments.

The sudden appearance and proliferation of these entities at Brown may well be at the extreme of some continuum of institutional genesis. But the phenomenon is pervasive. The University of Chicago alumni magazine recently featured Allan Bloom's call for a return to the traditional study of Western civilization and the great books, but in the same issue announced the establishment of three new interdisciplinary centers.

Anecdotes are often offered to explain the genesis of new centers and institutes. One was created to resolve the rift in Department X between Professor Y and Professor Z. Some were responses to foundation proposals; some reflected the idiosyncrasies of wealthy patrons. Others are the latest expressions of intellectual fads, new methodologies, special interests, or social concerns, including some emerging quasi-disciplines. Still other centers grow out of relations based on friendship, ego, ambition.

But those explanations even collectively fail to capture the essential quality of the phenomenon. The institutes and centers exist because almost none of the great questions of science, scholarship, or society fit in single disciplines and many such questions are now pursued collaboratively. Whether they are questions of origin: of particles, life, society, or the cosmos; questions of meaning: of existence, being human, kinship, or symbol; or questions of matter and energy: of atom, cell, family or nation—we quickly run up against the

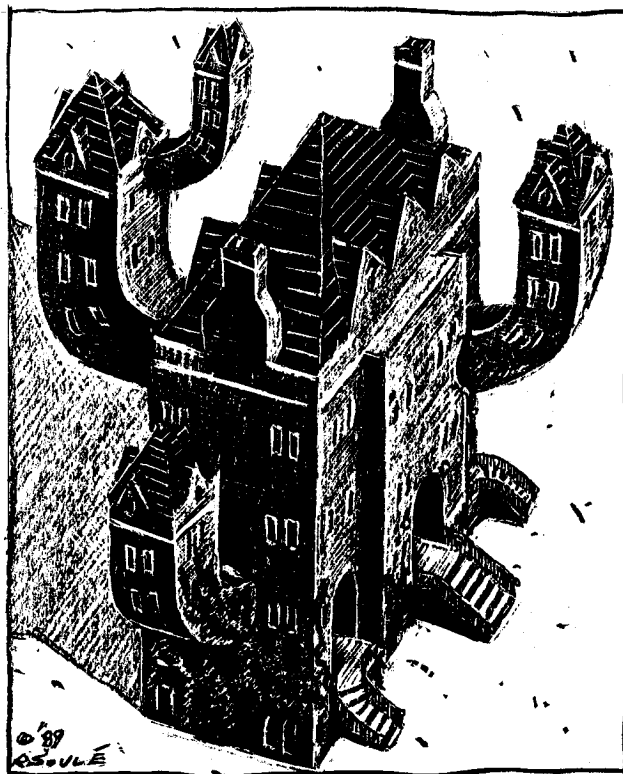


ILLUSTRATION FOR THE CHRONICLE BY ROBERT SOULE

boundaries of our disciplinary structures. And if we ask why people kill others, why hunger persists in a world of plenty, or why great gaps separate rich and poor, black and white, male and female—we quickly find how limited are our disciplinary perspectives.

I direct a program studying world hunger that illustrates the process. It grew out of the interest of Alan S. Feinstein, a Rhode Island businessman with a strong sense of social concern. After he approached Brown in 1985 asking that it administer an annual prize for individuals or organizations that made unique and lasting contributions to the prevention and reduction of world hunger, four faculty members and administrators worked with him to develop a program for the serious study of hunger.

The program that emerged after careful study and review focuses on two simple, but basic, research questions: Why does world hunger persist in a world of plenty? What can be done to reduce or prevent hunger now and in the future?

As we organized our first faculty semi-

nar, we found that scholarly material on its topic, the history of hunger, was sparse; historians, it appeared, are seldom hungry, and hungry people rarely write history. But as a sparse field, it was ripe for interdisciplinary inquiry. In all, 23 faculty members from 10 departments participated in the seminar, along with 10 scholars from other universities. A book based on the seminar, *Hunger in History*, will be published this year.

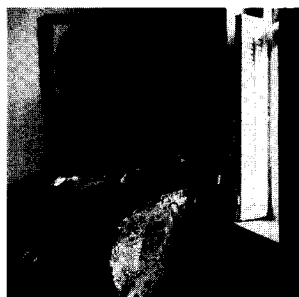
FROM THE SEMINAR, a conceptual framework to study and explain hunger has emerged—a proto-theory. It serves to frame research topics for our full-time staff of anthropologist, climatologist, and geographer; our part-time faculty of applied mathematician, biologist, demographer, librarian, and political scientist; and our affiliated faculty members from a dozen departments and several other universities. We are offering four courses this year, and we hold conferences and workshops and exchange information with a

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worldwide network of 60 research groups and institutions.

But we are not a discipline, nor should we be one, despite our proto-theory, scholarly materials, or university courses. We need to be inclusive, not exclusive; we will need new skills and insights as our current inquiries change.

We are doing what a university ought to do when it pursues one of the great questions of society—bringing together the best of science and scholarship to define, learn, and teach what is known and work with the many others who share the concern.

EVEN SO, it is understandable that many faculty members favor the organization of such programs into departments. About a third of the faculty at Brown is affiliated with centers or institutes, some people with more than one. Many more faculty members participate in their activities. Fully 70 per cent of the 1,300 speakers, conferences, performances, and exhibitions listed in the university calendar over the past year were sponsored solely or in part by the programs and centers.

Participating faculty members often feel

a great tension between their roles in their departments and in their centers, between where they teach and where they learn, between who pays them and who excites them, between who gives them tenure and who gives them sustenance. A commitment to a center almost always involves a doubling or even a tripling of required meetings. It is small wonder that many faculty members think new departments would help resolve the tensions; there are continuous requests for such recognition.

Faculty members outside the realm of centers and institutes see them as competing with departments, not only for funds, but also for space, for administrative attention, and for the most precious of our assets, faculty time. (At Brown, only an estimated 8 per cent of the non-medical, instructional budget goes to the institutes and centers; the rest comes from research grants and other sources of "soft" money.)

Some critics also complain that the centers distract their colleagues from the necessary work of the departments, leaving the burden of administering, counseling, and, at times, teaching to an already burdened few. And some department members are outraged by what they perceive as

flimsiness, fad, ideology, or scholarly irrelevance in the centers' content and methodology or in their pursuit of dollar, turf, or other ambition.

It is always difficult in the midst of change to comprehend it, to separate the ephemeral from the profound and the long-lasting. The emergence and flowering of the centers in the last quarter of this century represent as profound a change as was the emergence of graduate study and professional departments in the last quarter of the previous century. The university has not really come to grips with the long-term implications of the centers.

ALTHOUGH BROWN and many other institutions have formal procedures in place for the creation, review, and even termination of them, the basic assumption is that they are add-ons to the familiar structure of academic life. To go beyond being add-ons, somehow they must evolve into departments and take their place with those that have gone before.

But the proliferation of hybrid departments does not address the continuously changing nature of creative inquiry into the great questions of science, scholarship,

and society. The institutes and centers are emerging, flourishing, and multiplying because the pursuit of important questions is less and less a solitary, disciplinary activity. Advancing knowledge or analyzing policy requires a continuing process of recombination, ferment, and group work.

How to allow and indeed encourage that process of recombination, while providing for the long-term security and sustenance of individual scholars working beyond disciplines, is a central challenge to the university for the foreseeable future.

Alternatives to tenure based solely on discipline or department must be adopted. Budget processes must reflect the recognition that the work of the centers is central to the university. But such organizational recognition can only begin by taking full measure of the historic and profound changes under way in how we teach, how we continue to learn, and most important, how we question.

Incorporating the other university will necessarily change the familiar one.

Robert W. Kates is University Professor and director of the Alan Shawn Feinstein World Hunger Program at Brown University.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Good Music, From Whatever Period, Will Endure If It Is Really Good

TO THE EDITOR:

In answer to Jon Appleton's Opinion, "The College Music Curriculum Is in Pressing Need of Reform" (April 19), I would like to pose the question: How has it been obvious that it needs reform? Mr. Appleton's arguments are not convincing and stating something doesn't make it so.

The author states: "[S]ales show that [classical] music accounts for only a minuscule proportion of the records bought in this country." My reply to that is simply, So what? Mass taste or acceptance has never been the sole criterion to justify anything in academia, let alone in music or in art.

The author makes the statement: "It is absurd to dedicate hours to studying Bach's harmonization of chorale tunes when students don't sing chorale tunes." They don't? I bet they do . . . somewhere. And if they don't sing chorale tunes, perhaps they should, and a good music professor can lead the way.

There is the statement: "I often encounter superior musicians among my students who have never been to a chamber-music concert or a performance by a symphony orchestra." That's their misfortune. But come now—a Dartmouth music major who has never been to a performance of a symphony orchestra? Maybe the music curriculum at Dartmouth is in need of reform.

Jon Appleton's critique misses a very basic point: Good music, from whatever period of time or from whatever category, will prevail and endure if it is really good. The appreciation and study of one does not preclude the appreciation and study of others.

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TO THE EDITOR:

. . . Mr. Appleton seems to believe

that contemporary music teaching should involve "today's language" and not that of the past. Why bother studying the musical grammar of a bygone era if you are not going to use it?

While we are not writing in the style of Alexander Pope nowadays, we are using many of the same words and phrases. . . . Does Dr. Appleton believe that we ought to disassociate ourselves from the classical models? It is true that we don't write Bach-style chorales in the present, yet how many "rock artists" would benefit from a grounding in counterpoint?

If composers of popular music were better educated in traditional structures we would possibly be spared the agony of listening to horrible movie soundtracks riddled by a constant and cacophonous drum beat

(as in most movies out of Hollywood today). The latter may be the "music of our times," but does one need higher education to learn how to compose a relentless disco beat?

It is true that much new "serious" music is out of touch with the present, but most listeners are largely uneducated to this music and cannot be expected to grasp it easily at a first listening. Does this mean that suddenly we must abandon classical training, because the "masses don't like it," or because educators think it unnecessary? . . .

Audiences for classical music may dwindle, and the opportunities for popular musicians (e.g., rock) may be greater, but this does not mean that "classical" musicians should abandon the former for the latter. For many such musicians, their training

is far more involved than many of their popular counterparts, and to draw a parallel between the two borders on insulting (as was the drawing accompanying the article).

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TO THE EDITOR:

Those few "serious" composers who disdain to follow the academic route to "success" usually react with detached amusement when we read of an occasional awakening among the university set. When I left college 15 years ago it was already evident to me that the music curriculum, and composition in particular, had been in deep trouble for years. How long can it take to realize that music is not a branch of mathematics or science, to be analyzed, quantified, and formulated?

And what is one to think of composers who, never having left the security of a campus for any significant period of life, endlessly award one another prizes for paper music with portentous titles like *Apparitions of Transcendent Despair*?

Yet in the case of your recent article, one cannot afford to sit back in easy contempt. The notions espoused by Jon Appleton are not new. They are commonly reflected in the job advertisements of this very publication, and may well become a threat to the little that is left of music in our society.

Professor Appleton, frustrated with at least some of the stillborn, quasi-science approach to music in academe, apparently can think of no better suggestion than changing the music curriculum to serve commercial needs. Fitfully torturing a wrong-foot analogy between a middle-brow novelist like John Updike and a pointless obscurantist like Elliott Carter, he suggests, in essence, that

a college music curriculum would somehow become more "valid" if it were turned into a trade school for lounge acts and garage bands.

Professor Appleton knows something is wrong, but not what. Perhaps because, with the exception of ear training, the music theory he teaches has always been a rather dubious endeavor. Fabricated well after the actual music is composed, it is rather like a chemical analysis of a meal trying to pass itself off as the way to create an original recipe.

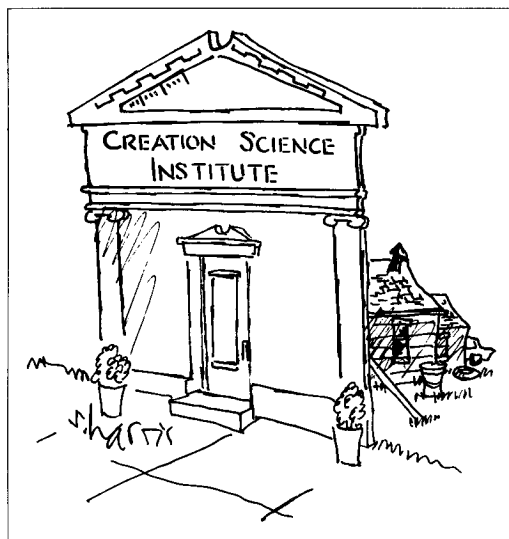
Though wise to the dead end of 12-tone theory, Mr. Appleton cannot fully exhume himself from academic moldering, thus suggesting the worst of both worlds: Let us now fabricate a study of such vestigial amounts of technique as remain in the commercial musical product. He bewails the fact that this is not being done, apparently secure enough in his tenure not to have to read the employment ads in this paper.

These ads call, with alarming frequency, for professors "skilled" in jazz and familiar with "music sequencing, etc." . . . It would seem to me that anyone interested in playing electric guitar need not waste thousands of dollars to have those in Mr. Appleton's frame of mind put them through some newly minted "curriculum." As Mr. Appleton himself points out, the lucrative trade in commercial music already functions quite amply without him.

Is it too late to point out the possibility that we could instead feel music? There is so much work of real depth and aspiration to be heard. Though frustrated (and jealous?) academics have tried for decades to dismiss it, such music is still with us, even at a few universities. Why continue to ignore Barber, Copland, Hanson, Thomson, Harris, Griffes, Rorem, and Argento, to name just a random handful of Americans?

We do have a healthy legacy of in-

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SYDNEY H. HARRIS