Chapter 4

The Disciplines

We working in our silos, silos
We working in our silos, silos
Slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly.

—Falco Holmz

MACALESTER COLLEGE ENROLLS about 2,100 students. The ratio of students to faculty is roughly ten to one (however such things are calculated, which remains something of a mystery to me). Faculty members are organized into thirty-two departments that offer thirty-eight different majors, thirty-nine minors, and ten interdisciplinary concentrations. The largest department (Math, Statistics, and Computer Science) has almost twenty tenured or tenure-track positions; the smallest (Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies) has two. Each department is supported by a department coordinator, or a portion of the time of a department coordinator. Each department has a budget and a chair who gets a reduction in teaching load. For the purposes of the curriculum, the departments are organized into four divisions—Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, and Fine Arts—though in most ways they don't behave as collective entities. When I departed in 2020, the Natural Science division was the only one that had a divisional chair and regular meetings; the Fine Arts faculty met from time to time; the various departments in the Social Sciences didn't get along well enough to meet; and the only time I can remember the humanists acting as a collective is when they united to complain that the scientists were getting too many resources and too much attention.

During my time at Macalester, no department was discontinued (more on that later), though, as at many colleges and universities, enrollment patterns shifted sharply away from the humanities and toward the natural

sciences. From time to time a tenure-track line was reallocated from one department to another. No new departments were added, though new majors, minors, and concentrations were added in areas including but not limited to Arabic, Applied Mathematics, Chinese, Community and Global Health, and Human Rights and Humanitarianism. The student body size grew by a couple hundred, while the student-to-faculty ratio remained unchanged.

Little of this is unusual. Earlham College, which according to its website in 2023 has 653 students, offers forty-one majors, which makes for an impressive student-to-major ratio of sixteen to one, along with forty minors and sixteen "applied minors."[1] Minnesota State Mankato, with about fourteen thousand students, offers 130 undergraduate programs and "over 85" graduate programs. Community colleges tend to be chopped up into fewer pieces: Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn also serves about fourteen thousand full- and part-time students: its faculty is organized into only fifteen departments, though they do offer thirty-seven degree programs. One would need a calculator to determine how many departments and programs were on the menu at a flagship public or large, selective private university.

This sort of atomization at colleges and universities is not limited to the faculty. It's harder to count the number of administrative departments since they tend to overlap and interweave, but at Macalester there were dozens, running not from A to Z but at least from A (Academic Programs and Advising) to W (Web Services). Some are quite large, and some comprise only a couple of people. During my presidency, some were adept at communicating with other administrators and with faculty, while others seemed equally adept at avoiding all forms of communication beyond the walls of their offices.

Very few if any other industries are chopped into as many different, highly specialized pieces as higher education. Very few have so few interchangeable parts and so little organizational flexibility. Very few, as a result, are so agonizingly difficult to change.

The estimable Clark Kerr, first chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, famously described the American university as "a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking." For Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of

Chicago, the unifying feature was the heating system.[2] They were not far off, though I would add two caveats: first, most faculty members are not in fact entrepreneurs—entrepreneurs by definition create new enterprises and take risks—and second, when faculty members are not acting as free agents, they do sometimes think of themselves as belonging to a "department" and a discipline. Nevertheless, the central point made by Kerr and Hutchins, that the university is less a coherent organization than a loosely connected assemblage of disparate parts, is correct.

Ask a faculty member that strange question of which Americans are so fond—"What do you do?"—and you're much more likely to get an answer like, "I'm a biologist," or "I'm a historian," than "I'm a college professor." (The exception is if the person teaches at a hyperelite institution, in which case the answer is more likely to be, "I teach at Stanford," or, to paraphrase David Sedaris, "I work at a school in the Boston area.")[3] Faculty members, in other words, are more inclined to think of themselves as members of a sort of disciplinary guild than as members of a collective body called the faculty of a college. Why is this the case, and how does it affect the operations of an institution?

To answer these questions, we need to begin by looking at the history and present nature of graduate education, the products of which make up the faculties of most colleges and universities. "Faculty . . . are formed by their graduate training," David Rosowsky and Bridget Keegan correctly observe. "That formation—a remembrance of what was—shapes expectations of what should be."[4] So let us consider the expectations.

The advanced degree of choice in academia is the PhD, which began to be offered in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century as one of many imported features of German universities. While the degree of "Doctor of Philosophy" was awarded as early as the Middle Ages, the PhD in something like its modern form, based on excellence in research, was first awarded by the University of Berlin (now Humboldt University) in 1810 and was inextricable from the idea of the university as primarily a center of scholarship rather than a center of teaching.[5] At this and other German universities, Andrew Delbanco notes, "academic freedom prevailed, research laboratories as well as graduate seminars first attained their modern form, and 'professors could function exclusively as scholars and researchers' since they 'did not have to bother themselves with remedying undergraduate deficiencies.'"[6] For several decades American

students would have to travel to Europe to obtain doctoral degrees, until Yale University awarded the first PhDs in the United States in 1861 and was followed over the next two decades by the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and Princeton.[7] Many students still went abroad to study, but the shift to an American-based graduate system had begun.

The PhD remained a niche degree in the United States until the formation in 1900 of the Association of American Universities. This effort to raise the standards and visibility of graduate education was led by presidents including Charles William Eliot of Harvard and Benjamin Ide Wheeler of California, who had themselves studied under the German model.[8] The association has expanded from the original fourteen members to sixty-five today, which appears to be growth at a reasonably modest pace over more than a century. In 1900, three hundred PhDs were awarded by universities in the United States; that number has risen steadily in the ensuing decades, though it appears to have peaked and has held steady during the past several years at about fifty-five thousand per year—roughly twice what it was fifty years earlier.[9] That growth is not so modest, and the plateau in recent years has come at a time when undergraduate enrollment has been declining. A number of universities have paused or reduced admissions to certain graduate programs as a consequence of the pandemic, but it remains to be seen whether this is a temporary lull or a permanent shift.[10]

Much of this explosive spread of graduate education can be explained by the needs of society, the rise in the number of college graduates seeking further training, and the creation and expansion of new fields of knowledge. But an equally important explanation has to do with the needs and priorities of the universities themselves and the faculty who populate them. While the demand for PhDs in computer science or economics is stronger than ever, it has been years—decades—since the demand for PhDs in most areas of the humanities or social sciences was anywhere close to the endless, enormous supply. In 2019, pre-pandemic, the highly ranked English department at Columbia University placed only a single PhD graduate into a tenure-track position while admitting nineteen new students into the program.[11] This is not an exception but the rule, and it is getting worse: as Leonard Cassuto, whose book *The Graduate School Mess* remains the definitive study of the graduate school mess, wryly observes, "Thousands of professors are currently in the business of

preparing thousands of graduate students for jobs that don't exist."[12] Yet the cycle continues because graduate students have for a long time been the fuel that powers the engine of the modern research university, or at least of the portion that purports to be the core: the arts and sciences.

Every research university with PhD students relies heavily on those students to teach undergraduates at a cost that is much lower than the cost of full-time faculty and in order to reduce the number of part-time faculty that need to be hired. Determining the precise number of courses taught by graduate students at most universities can be challenging, since this tends not to be a number featured on admissions tours or the "Quick Facts" web page and since teaching can mean anything from having full responsibility for a course to assisting with grading. But the number is high. In 2017, about 26 percent of courses at universities including Purdue and South Florida were taught by graduate students, and in the same year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, universities relied on over 135,000 graduate assistants.[13] Even with declining undergraduate enrollments, the cost of replacing these graduate instructors with other faculty would blow apart the financial model at most universities, and at the most prestigious universities undergraduate enrollment is not declining. Another option, of course, would be to increase the teaching load of full-time faculty. Good luck with that. Interestingly, and despite their receiving almost no pedagogical training, graduate instructors generally do a pretty good job: according to a study in the *Economics of Education Review*, "undergraduates are *more* [my emphasis] likely to major in a subject if their first course in the subject was taught by a graduate student."[14] Whether this tells us more about graduate instructors or about everyone else is difficult to know.

My undergraduate years were a very long time ago, but I suspect that my experience would seem familiar to a current undergraduate at the same university. My freshman seminar was taught by a grad student in comparative literature; my introductory courses in chemistry and psychology were large lectures supported by discussion sections with grad students; most of my papers in my literature surveys were graded by grad students; and nearly all my work in math and physics was done with grad students. It was not until I moved into upper-level courses in my major that my instruction and grading were provided wholly by full-time faculty members. Sometimes I got to know these grad students well, sometimes they were simply

names on a graded paper or rotating assistants in a tutorial. The teaching done by these students was presumably intended to prepare them for their future careers as professors, but in fields where there are virtually no jobs as professors, it is hard to see the work as career preparation and easy to see it as comparatively inexpensive labor. This is precisely the argument being made by graduate assistants who are unionizing and sometimes striking at more and more universities: they see graduate teaching not as "preparation for a decently paying academic job that may never arrive" but as work that they do for a limited time before leaving the academy.[15] The reason it takes longer on average to get a PhD in the humanities than a PhD in mechanical engineering or biology is not because of the challenges of the discipline but because the graduate student in the humanities has no incentive to enter the job market.[16]

The second crucial role played by graduate students is to enable full-time faculty members to teach graduate courses. "Just about every professor," Cassuto writes, "wants to teach graduate school. Lots of them regard it practically as their birthright . . . which isn't so unusual when you consider that the experience invokes their own birth as professional intellectuals." Teaching within American universities has a very well-established hierarchy, "with graduate teaching perched at its summit."[17] Here is the sad peculiarity of the food chain within American higher education: the further one gets from teaching undergraduates, the less of such teaching one does, the more distinguished one is considered. Adjuncts or community college faculty who teach eight or ten courses each year and carry out what is supposed to be the core work of education are far less highly regarded within the profession than endowed professors at elite universities who teach maybe one or two courses a year, and those often to small groups of graduate students.

Graduate teaching affords benefits beyond status. Especially in the humanities and some of the social sciences, graduate curricula have few requirements and less coherence. (Though this creeps into the natural sciences as well: PhD students in chemistry at MIT have a total of zero required courses.) Within only the most flexible of boundaries, teachers of graduate students get to teach whatever they want. Undergraduate curricula in disciplines like English and history are very loosely constructed, but compared with graduate curricula they are models of forethought and coherence. Cassuto again: "Term by term, year by year, the graduate course

offerings in humanities departments don't make sense together. They're a hodgepodge of specialized inquiries: snapshots of books and articles in progress by professors who know what they're determined to teach, but not what their students need most to learn. Nor do most professors know what their colleagues are teaching alongside them."[18]

My PhD dissertation was on Charles Dickens. I did not take a single course in graduate school in which a novel by Dickens was on the syllabus because the Dickens expert was on a two-year research leave (ponder that for a moment) and other faculty closest to my area of study chose to teach courses on Virginia Woolf and Thomas Hardy (but not George Eliot or Henry James), Percy Shelley and Lord Byron (but not John Keats), and John Ruskin (but not Matthew Arnold). If you're a graduate student in English, you take what you can get. If you're a faculty member in English teaching graduate courses, what a treat to be able to teach what interests you most and to combine work on your latest book or article with your class preparation. Scale back the number of graduate students and you might be forced to teach the second semester of a British literature survey to sophomores.

The organization of graduate curricula around faculty specializations creates a cadre of specialists, when both higher education and other professions are far more in need of generalists. Not once—not once—during my time in graduate school was I encouraged to think of myself as a member of a university-wide group. As someone focused on nineteenth-century British literature, I had limited contact not only with graduate students outside the English Department but with students within the department whose focus was on American literature and whose faculty were mostly housed in a different building. Despite a gesture toward breadth on my oral examinations, my area of study was extremely narrow. When I became one of the fortunate few to land a tenure-track job—at a small liberal arts college—I was immediately asked to teach introductory literature of all kinds and, naturally, a survey of British literature from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The last time I had even read *Paradise Lost* was in my own literature survey as a sophomore in college.

This crazy quilt of courses and specializations is what led Derek Bok to complain that "graduate schools are among the most poorly administered and badly designed of all the advanced degree programs in the university"—an impressive statement considered the context.[19] PhD programs somehow manage to make law schools look good by comparison.

All of this explains why *U.S. News and World Report* in 2022 listed more PhD programs in English (157) or history (146) than in economics (139). This has virtually nothing to do with external factors and everything to do with the internal dynamics of universities. If almost no graduates in English from Columbia, ranked 8th by *U.S. News* in that discipline, are getting good jobs in academia, what are the prospects for graduates of programs ranked 50th or 150th, when prestige plays so important a role in the faculty hiring process?

For here is another poorly kept secret about American higher education: faculty hiring committees are as fixated on reputation as are the avid consumers of *U.S. News* rankings. According to a comprehensive study published in *Nature*, just five universities—Berkeley, Harvard, Michigan, Madison, and Stanford—produce about one-eighth of the nation's tenure-track faculty members. Eighty percent of those faculty members earned their degrees at 20 percent of the research universities in the country. "Prestige," the authors of the study observe,

> plays a central role in structuring the US professoriate. Analyses of faculty hiring networks, which map who hires whose graduates as faculty, show unambiguously in multiple fields that prestigious departments supply an outsized proportion of faculty, regardless of whether prestige is measured by an extrinsic ranking or reputation scheme or derived from the structure of the faculty hiring network itself. Prestigious departments also exhibit "social closure" by excluding those who lack prestige, facilitated by relatively stable hierarchies over time, both empirically and in mathematical models of self-reinforcing network dynamics.[20]

Not only is the market for PhDs in most disciplines vastly oversupplied: it is effectively rigged. One of the ways for a struggling college to signal its legitimacy and quality is to announce that its new hire in English or sociology has a PhD from a university with a reputation far stronger than its own. It's difficult for even a supremely gifted graduate of a less prestigious university to get past an initial screening of candidates, let alone to get hired.

It is at this point virtually impossible for most graduate faculty in struggling disciplines to be unaware that their programs are broken.

Efforts to fix them, however, crash up against a nearly impenetrable wall of resistance to change. In 2015, the National Endowment for the Humanities began issuing grants as part of a program called the Next Generation Humanities PhD, whose "goal was to focus on what the NEH delicately called 'disparities between graduate-student expectations for a career in academe and eventual career outcomes,' and to further the role of the humanities in public life."[21] Planning or implementation grants were awarded to universities including Princeton, Fordham, Washington State, Penn State, Duke, and many others. The program was "quietly canceled" only two years later, having had an impact that might generously be described as negligible. The reasons cited by some of the participants for its failure are unsurprising:

> Many grantees reflected that curricular committees make it difficult to add new courses, especially when coordination among multiple departments was necessary. . . . [Success] would require dramatically rethinking the timeline and content of Ph.D. education—a logistically challenging and existentially fraught task that few departments are eager to tackle. . . . Attempts to transform the dissertation were even more disappointing. Several colleges expressed interest in this idea . . . but few actually tackled it. . . . Most grantees noted some degree of faculty opposition to changing graduate education, resting on a combination of unfamiliarity, overwork, and a commitment to traditional, tenure-track-oriented career prep. . . . Many faculty members felt deep discomfort in talking about the issues, and clung to the notion that preparation for nonacademic careers was something graduate students might do "personally, not as part of their training."[22]

In a novel by Richard Russo or Jane Smiley, this would be the stuff of dark comedy. Outside the world of fiction, however, it is very bad news for current and future graduate students in the humanities and in other disciplines with a shrinking number of tenure-track jobs. Steven Mintz has described the "cries of anguish" from these students, and he is not far off, given the unwillingness of graduate programs to adapt to present circumstances.[23] A survey conducted at four campuses of the University of California (Berkeley, Davis, San Diego, and Merced) found that more PhD students

in the humanities reported receiving career advice from "friends and other" than from faculty or their departments.[24] Given the fact that faculty seem to have little advice to offer, this is, I suppose, unsurprising.

There is a glimmer of good news, at least for graduate students in the humanities. At a handful of universities, departments have begun incorporating preparation for nonacademic careers into their programs, mainly through the offering of internships and similar experiential opportunities. With support from the Mellon Foundation, Brandeis University began an initiative called Connected PhD that "funds professional development experiences, including fellowships (something like paid internships) on campus or at external locations identified by the candidate." The Brandeis English Department is working on curricular revision that would provide better preparation for jobs other than the tenure-track positions on which graduate programs traditionally focus.[25] While this is extremely helpful for the many graduates who will end up working outside the academy, it doesn't directly address the question of how graduates understand work within the academy itself. Preparation for work at a university press or a think tank is not the same as preparation to rethink how the university functions. It is also the case that, while Brandeis is a wonderful university, its graduate programs in the humanities are not among the most selective or prestigious in the country. At the most renowned and influential programs, the resistance to even these changes is likely to be stronger. An "Advisory Working Group" at Yale recently issued a report that revealed just how poorly PhD students in the humanities were faring in the tenure-track job market and made a number of recommendations for changes similar to those being tested at Brandeis. We shall see what follows, but, in a less than encouraging sign, one member of the Yale English Department called the report "coercion," and another noted its "hostility to departmental autonomy and self-governance."[26] Apparently autonomy includes the ability not to provide much information on job placement: the department's "Graduate Student Placement" webpage includes no actual data but a short summary of highlights. According to those highlights, the department placed two graduates in tenure-track jobs in 2020–21 and two in 2019–20. There is no information on how many sought such jobs.[27]

Notwithstanding the abysmal job market in some disciplines and the competition from higher-paying industries in others, some PhDs do make

it into tenure-track positions in American colleges and universities. Though these tenure-track faculty no longer form a majority in higher education, they do form the nonadministrative group with the most power at virtually all four-year and many two-year institutions. And what has their time in graduate school taught them, aside from the requisite knowledge of their fields?

Despite the absence of many core courses in PhD programs, there is one core lesson that is inculcated into students in virtually all of these programs: research is more important than teaching. Not just more important but *much* more important.

Let me be clear. It is nearly impossible to overstate the value of much of the research and scholarship that is carried out at universities in the United States and around the world. While these institutions are not perfect, they are more adept at engaging in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge than any other organizations and have contributed enormously to the social good. The most tangible benefits, of course, come from the sciences—two of the COVID-19 vaccines authorized in the United States were developed in part at Harvard—but much of the work done in the social sciences, humanities, and fine arts has deepened our understanding of our own nature and history and shown us what it means, for better or worse, to be human. Yes, much of the work appears to lead nowhere or to be absurdly trivial, but that is the nature of the research enterprise: it often takes many failures to produce success, and it is sometimes the apparently trivial that leads to the greatest advances. These points have been made many times: "Failure is integral to research and scholarship—it is how theories are refined, discoveries are made, and innovations are developed."[28] Like so much in the modern university, these arguments do apply more easily to the sciences than to the humanities. Mark Taylor, former chair of the Religion Department at Columbia, observed wryly, "A colleague recently boasted to me that his best student was doing his dissertation on how the medieval theologian Duns Scotus used citations."[29] Perhaps there is such a thing as being *too* trivial.

The main problem with the overvaluation of research in graduate school and in the evaluation of faculty members is not the frequency of failure or even the narrowness of focus. It is, first, the distortion of the research itself. I have in my career participated in hundreds of tenure and promotion reviews in which research was centrally important

(at Macalester the president is a member of the review committee), and generally the question on everyone's mind—the person under review and the reviewers—was not, "What sort of research or scholarship would be most valuable?" but "What sort of research or scholarship is most likely to lead to tenure or promotion?" In a massive survey of higher education professionals conducted by *Times Higher Education*, journal prestige was considered more important in judging the quality of research than importance to society.[30] This is unsurprising. No matter how promising the book project or experimental study, the advice to an untenured assistant professor was generally to delay or abandon it if it seemed unlikely to produce publications or grant funding within the narrow window of time before the tenure review. Of course even the most altruistic scientists and scholars will be driven in part by personal ambition, but when the chief goal of research becomes career advancement rather than the pursuit of knowledge or contribution to the social good—and can anyone argue that this is not the incentive system we have created?—the mission of the university is not strengthened.

Second, and as I noted in my opening chapter, we have decided (or the nineteenth-century Germans decided and we followed) that research and undergraduate teaching should be joined together within the same, sometimes sprawling and loosely organized institutions. If research is important to society, education is equally so—perhaps more so, since there is ample evidence that the economic and social return on the investment in education is enormous.[31] The current structure of higher education has created a situation in which we often have to choose between these two essential activities—research and education—and the nature of graduate school leads to a situation in which research too often wins. In a world with the right priorities, the work of teachers in community colleges who are educating the most underserved students in the country would command respect equal to the work of a tenured professor at an Ivy League university who was writing articles on, say, Dickens. But that is not the world in which we live.

When I was pursuing my PhD at Columbia, there was no requirement that graduate students teach, let alone a requirement that graduate students be taught how to teach. My particular fellowship provided me with the option to teach at Columbia for up to, but not more than, two years, an option of which I took advantage. As a twenty-three-year-old

second-year graduate student, I was assigned to teach introductory composition in Columbia's School of General Studies, the division of the university responsible for educating "returning and non-traditional students." All of my students were older than I was. I might have received a couple of days of training, but if so I can remember none of the details. I was terrified, and I was, by any reasonably objective measure, incompetent. My teaching in the School of General Studies was not something I ever discussed with the faculty in the English Department, most of whom had never come anywhere near that division of the university. My mentors were nice enough people, but if I had shown up at an office hour and asked to chat about teaching adult students and not about my dissertation or oral examinations, I suspect that they would have been more than a little puzzled. After my two years of teaching at Columbia expired, I continued my classroom apprenticeship by teaching writing at Queens College and required courses in the humanities at the Cooper Union—motivated less by a desire to become a better teacher than by a desire to pay my rent in Manhattan. I think that I was passable at the Cooper Union, where my job was mostly to teach literature, but at Queens College my task was to teach students for most of whom English was a second language, and I was, again, ill-prepared and barely competent.

Fortunately most graduate instructors are better than I was and things have changed in graduate programs since the 1980s—but only slightly. The Columbia English Department now mandates a one-credit, ungraded course entitled Teaching Writing: Theory and Practice for all PhD students, and similar courses are offered in many disciplines at many universities. Some form of teaching is now mandated in most PhD programs. But to describe progress toward the PhD—the required degree for most *teaching* positions in higher education in the United States—as including anything like rigorous training in teaching would be an enormous overstatement, unless one considers being thrown head-first into the deep end of the pool a form of rigorous training. Graduate students are rewarded with fellowships, prizes, and general approbation not for doing a wonderful job as a teaching assistant in introductory inorganic chemistry but for the quality of their research. Graduate teaching prizes do exist, but they occupy roughly the role of congeniality awards at beauty pageants.

The nature of graduate education creates in PhD students a particular set of priorities and expectations. The crown jewel of jobs is one in which

you have to do as little teaching as possible—that is, a tenure-track job at a research university. The higher the teaching load, the less desirable the job, not only because teaching can be hard work but because it is work that within virtually all disciplines is less highly regarded than research. For those fortunate enough to land a tenure-track job at a four-year institution, this hierarchy of priorities continues: the more prestigious the research university, the less relevant teaching is to tenure and promotion. Even within the universe of liberal arts colleges, which define themselves as teaching institutions, the scholarly expectations among the wealthiest and most selective, as measured by things like publications and grants, have come to resemble those at research universities at the same time as teaching loads have been reduced. All of this has created a structure of perverse incentives within which the most coveted reward a faculty member can receive is having to spend less time with actual students. Given the choice between a monetary stipend or a reduction in teaching load, many faculty members at Macalester, during my presidency, chose the latter.

Teaching at a college should be an activity that brings faculty together around a shared purpose: regardless of whether one teaches philosophy or physics, many of the goals, methods, challenges, and priorities are the same. There should be a lot to talk about. Research tends to be something that fragments faculty into small, discrete groups: the scholarly work of a historian is best understood and validated not by colleagues in biology but by other historians in the same subfield, most of whom will reside at other institutions. In this way the glorification of research in graduate school contributes to the creation of silos on college campuses and makes it less likely that faculty members, even at teaching institutions, will think of themselves as members of a *faculty* and not a department. The discipline, an intellectual construct, gets packaged into a department, an organizational construct. There exist at most colleges a smattering of programs on teaching, generally offered out of some sort of teaching and learning center, and many faculty members do participate, but for most the importance of these programs pales in comparison to their engagement with their disciplines and their departments.

In sum, as Delbanco notes, the most treasured form of academic freedom for tenured faculty is "the freedom . . . to pursue an inquiry of one's own choice and to have the results assessed by one's peers"—meaning disciplinary peers outside the institution—while "serious collaboration in

the work of educating undergraduates is rare."[32] Aside from its unfortunate effects on undergraduates, this fragmentation renders serious institutional change almost impossible to achieve. Among the regularly cited requirements to be a change agent in academia is "the capacity to utilize a collaborative style to connect to diverse constituent groups and gain buy in through a process of campus involvement."[33] But a collaborative style only goes so far in an environment that is structured to be noncollaborative. Another requirement is a sense of "collective ambition" that arises from a shared set of values, priorities, and goals.[34] But within higher education it is often the case that collective ambition loses out to individual ambition in the form of personal or departmental priorities. If a campus cannot agree on a set of common goals, other than the goal of not going broke, it is next to impossible to convince people that those goals and the methods of achieving them must change.

Time and again during my years as a faculty member, dean, and president, collective ambition would come into conflict with departmental ambition, and on nearly every occasion the latter proved to be the more powerful force. This is not the fault of individuals but of the fragmented culture and siloed structure that dominate higher education and that have been getting worse as the number of departments and even the divisions within departments—specializations within specializations—have increased. William Bowen and Eugene Tobin worry that "within the faculty ranks, cherished traditions of debate, consultation, deliberation, and the search for consensus have been diminished by the compartmentalized nature of the academy and by the faculty members' loyalties to their disciplines rather than to their institutions."[35] When I was the chair of an English department, I viewed most questions through the lens of departmental interests; when I became an administrator, unattached to any department, I viewed those same questions through an institutional lens. I was the same person located at different points in the system. Propose the addition of a particular general education requirement and the first question on the minds of most faculty members will not be, "Is this good for students?" but "How will this affect my department?" The same is true for questions about shifting faculty lines, introducing a new minor, raising money for a new building, or even—as we have seen—identifying antiracism as a campus priority.[36] As a group of faculty members from North Carolina A&T University has written,

> The . . . reward structure [at universities] aggravates turf wars to the point that often college deans and department chairs brag about how they have successfully negotiated to increase their budget and holdings while forgetting that they are working for the greater good. Often loyalty to a department or college leads to irrational and anti-interdisciplinary decisions in an effort to maintain the status quo. The general interest of the students, university, and greater public is compromised.[37]

Train people from the moment they enter graduate school to identify with a discipline rather than a profession, place them in an organizational structure that reinforces that identity, and this is the natural result.[38]

A sports metaphor might be helpful here. Faculty at a college or university are less like a baseball team and more like an all-star team. Players on the Yankees or Red Sox identify first as members of a team, a group working in concert toward a common goal; they don't identify first as members of the fraternity of first basemen or catchers. The success of the team depends on the strength of this collective identity. Players on an all-star team would of course like to win, but they are there primarily as examples par excellence of their position: the best center fielder or shortstop. Most faculty at most colleges think of themselves first not as members of a "team" that is the college and whose success depends on cooperation, but as all-stars, representatives of the discipline of geology or economics. Teamwork is secondary to individual or disciplinary excellence. Or as Matthew Reed puts it, "The culture of faculty, in which they regard themselves largely as independent contractors on loan from their disciplines, implies a different locus of loyalty than the culture of staff, who regard themselves as employees of the college" (though I'm guessing that most faculty would prefer the label "all-star" to the label "contractor").[39]

On the best sports teams, players are willing to sacrifice individual accomplishments in the interest of team success. Rarely are faculty prepared to sacrifice departmental priorities for the larger priorities of the college. Again, this is not about character or values, but about the way academics are trained and acculturated and the way colleges are organized.

The tension between departmental interests and the interests of the "greater public" can slow the pace of change to a crawl. In 2020 the Harold Alfond Foundation made a commitment of $250 million to the University

of Maine system "to bring transformative change to the state's largest educational, research, innovation and talent development asset." A portion of this gift, along with $75 million of institutional funding, is to be dedicated to the creation of a new College of Engineering, Computing, and Information Science located on the Orono campus, a response to the fact that "Maine schools will not graduate enough engineers in the next decade to keep up with projected demand, and the shortfall could hamper the state's economic growth." This seems rather important. Yet the new college, whose development has been described as "inching forward," is provoking "concerns of faculty across the system about losing autonomy over their campus-specific programs." The chair of the Electrical Engineering Department at the University of Southern Maine is worried that the new college "would erase distinct characteristics of USM's engineering program" and cautions that the university needs to "respect the differences between . . . the institutions in the system." The questions at the heart of the debate between the administration and the faculty are less about the interests of the state of Maine than about issues like the following: "How can USM engineering become a division of a college at the University of Maine? I have my own dean, my own provost and president. Who is my boss now?" This is predictable, because when departmental interests are prioritized over institutional or public interests, these are the sorts of questions people will naturally ask: Who is my boss now? A version of this scenario plays out every day in every state both within university systems and on individual campuses and makes the Alfond Foundation's goal of "transformative change" agonizingly difficult to realize.[40]

Another problem with the division of the faculty into many departments that is rarely remarked on and that is especially apparent at smaller institutions is the outsized influence the structure affords to problematic faculty members. In a large group their influence can be diluted, but when a department comprises only a handful of people, it only takes one to render the entire thing dysfunctional. A bad apple can more easily cause spoilage when the barrel is tinier. There are few things more demoralizing than being trapped for decades in a small department with an awful colleague, and, between tenure and departmental autonomy, there are not many easy ways to remedy such a situation. Change is difficult enough when things are operationally efficient; when several departments are engaged at any given time in a civil war, change is next to impossible.

And any dean, provost, or president will—in a moment of candor—admit that this situation is extremely common. I'm reasonably sure that during my time as dean of the faculty at Lawrence University and president at Macalester, we brought in an external mediator at least once each year in an attempt to get members of one department or another to work together in a way that did not cause problems for students. The limiting factor was not the number of warring departments but the amount we wanted to spend on mediators.

There is evidence that the faculty at colleges and universities recognize that the departmental structure has its drawbacks: witness the proliferation of interdisciplinary concentrations and variously titled centers, whose creation has as much to do with the desire of faculty to work outside their departments as with any curricular need. In other words, "we start with a collection of disparate scholars and fields, impose a departmental structure and then go to great lengths to create centers and institutes and cross-cutting programs that work around that departmental structure."[41] If you are in a dysfunctional department, these programs can seem like islands in a sea of despair. But interdisciplinary programs are almost always created *in addition to* rather than *in place of* disciplinary departments and usually have to fight for funding within an academic budget that is already allocated elsewhere. They work at the edges and not in the center.

While a handful of colleges have attempted to abandon the departmental structure, it has proved to be virtually impervious to change. The group from North Carolina A&T suggests that "disciplinary courses and disciplinary experts can exist in a University without an administrative unit called the Department or the College. Courses should be taught by disciplinary experts but should be owned by the office of academic affairs not by disciplinary units."[42] Rosowsky and Keegan propose that faculty "self-organize" into units of their choice, which, I must confess, is among the least feasible proposals I have ever heard.[43] Taylor argues for the abolishment of permanent departments and the creation of "problem-focused programs" on areas like mind, money, and water, each of which would draw from multiple disciplines and have sunset clauses.[44] This is an interesting idea, but—putting aside the fact that it will never happen—it is difficult even to imagine the ongoing amount of organizational and administrative effort it would require. If there is to be a move away from

the dominance of the disciplines, the conflict between the interests of departments and the interests of the college or university, and the prioritization of research over teaching, it must begin where the problem begins: with graduate education. If graduate school "shapes expectations [among faculty] of what should be," the best way to change those expectations over time is to change graduate school.[45] It should be possible to inculcate a sense of the centrality of teaching and to take preparation for teaching as seriously as programs take preparation for writing a scholarly paper; it should be possible to create opportunities for graduate students to work across and not simply within departments; it should be possible to teach graduate students the basics about things such as the financial model and the social function of the institutions they inhabit. It should be possible, in other words, to shape graduate programs around the interests of the graduate students rather than around the interests of the graduate faculty without blowing up the university altogether. My guess is that a graduate program that attempted these things, especially a program in areas of the humanities and social sciences whose graduates face bleak job prospects, would find enthusiastic takers, and that the graduates of such programs, if they made their way into colleges and universities, would see their work and their institutions in new and better ways.