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Account, Accounting, Accountability

/HAROLD HELLENBRAND/

BEFORE I discuss what it means to work in and chair an English department in a University of Excellence, I need to clarify what a university dedicated to excellence means, at least in my experience. For four years, I chaired an English department on a campus with a mission to be excellent (/Strategic/, ?Goal #1?). Then, as a dean in Minnesota for four years, I worked on strategic plans and performance indicators that pointed toward accountability in the context of total quality management (Franz, ch. 1). And now, back in the California State University system as a dean at California Polytechnic State University, I work in a system that is guided, in part, by a document, /The Cornerstones Report/, that dedicates us to excellence (Broad 2). I have not read the Cal Poly campus strategic plan this week, but I am sure that, since we are all children of Lake Wobegon, Cal Poly aims to be above average, nay, excellent, too (/California Polytechnic/, sec. 2, 3, and 7). Experienced as I am with such excellence, it is nonetheless difficult for me to explain. And maybe that difficulty tells us something about /excellence/?that term of ?no content??as the word is used today in universities (Readings 13).

Thinkers like Jean-Francois Lyotard in /The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge /and Bill Readings in /The University in Ruins/ theorize excellence in ways that capture humanities? faculty despairing view of the fate of learning today. The central claims run something like this: contemporary ?incredulity toward metanarratives? has undermined collective faith in those stories or public myths that have legitimated higher education and, supposedly, have entitled it to, well, entitlements (Lyotard xxiv). Higher learning as public emancipation from ignorance and tyranny, as synthesis and ordering of all that we know, as inculcator of social mores that underwrite the civil state has been eroded by the suspicion that knowledge is but another name for power and self-aggrandizement, that order is an artifice, and that the state is merely a mailing address for international capital; the university is in ruins because its civic purpose and ethical meaning have yielded to a variety of local, sometimes contradictory, often competing and

overlapping systems of thinking and power that value utility?that is, performativity and efficiency?more than truth and more than judgment. Excellence, in turn, signifies the degree to which we in the university do work?that is, research, teaching, service?that materially improves measurable performance with little regard for significant truths and judgments. A ?logic of quantification? and ?exhaustive accounting? gauge whether a university?s outputs show that value has been added to its inputs (Readings 26, 29).

There is some accuracy in this reading of the postmodern university; it captures the perception within many universities that teaching and study matter not as ends themselves but only as means to extrinsic and measurable goals. Even Clark Kerr, who helped formulate the Master Plan that enmeshed California?s higher education in corporate and government technocracy, believes that higher education now lacks a story, a framework, that can legitimate it against competing social agendas and effectively trump the regime of accountability. He views the political success of the Master Plan in the 1960s as a continuation of the story of the GI Bill, this time for the GIs? children?in the face of cold war (Kerr par. 3 and 5).

Still, this reading of the university misses an essential point. The production of excellence does not mean that we are wholly given over to either the logic of accounting or even the exercise of accountability. The effort to show excellence is fundamentally about making an account, a narrative that inspires public credulity. But this account now must function without hero, plot, incident, and setting?the usual trappings of stories that engage us. Modern?or is it postmodern??self-consciousness converts narrative protagonist and antagonist into ?partners,? plot line into ?continuous improvement,? and incident into goals, principles, performance areas, and quality indicators, all in a cyclical time line that substitutes for chronology.

/Excellence/ in the California State University system substantiates this interpretation of accountability as foremost an effort to tell an account. Accountability is a ?public-oriented process,? we are told in a leading CSU document (/CSU/). It is about communicating a time line for numerous actions that are enacted by partners?the faculty, the staff, students, government, and other stakeholders. CSU requires four policy goals with ten guiding principles, five principles of accountability, and seventeen performance areas with forty-seven quality indicators. Annually, the California Postsecondary Education Commission overlays all this with ninety-eight of its own performance indicators (/Performance/).

Here is an irony that you face as a department chair in English. You work within a system of legitimation that in all likelihood is desperate for an inspiring story but that is hostile to the elements of storytelling. Credulity and credibility depend, therefore, on amassing lists within established frameworks of analyses. The university, as a successful enterprise, is to be induced from this metonymic representation?from an always partial list of its effects.

Excellence therefore poses the puzzle of Humpty-Dumpty: how to assemble analytical fragments?instances of effects?so that they give the impression of a purposeful whole. But even the status of documents like /Cornerstones/ that propound excellence indicates the difficulty of the task in today?s overdetermined sites of higher education. /Cornerstones/ says that it is not actually a ?blueprint? for higher education in the California State University system (Broad 3). Rather, the preexisting blueprints are the Master Plan and the education code, which tie success to the tripartite functionality of community colleges, comprehensive universities (CSU), and research universities (the University of California system) and to the fulfillment of degree work and credit

requirements. /Cornerstones/ also admits that it does not capture the strategic plans of the campuses, the directives of accrediting bodies, the mandates associated with teacher preparation by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, the system?s own technology initiatives and measures, and so on. Nonetheless, it seeks to be an ?umbrella effort,? ?an overarching set of statewide goals and plans? between and among agencies and agents that often communicate at cross-purposes, in different dialects, alas, to you (3).

The public declaration of what metonymically represents excellence is necessary because, in part, the university and its departments are sites on which external and internal systems of certification, each with its own template of accountability, compete for a purchase on resources. Few tasks for a chair and a dean are more enervating and more essential than trying to layer these assorted goals, dialects, and accounts so that they appear roughly, even fictively, congruent for faculty and staff members, students, alumni, donors, and friends, thereby aligning the meaning(s) of what we are about. And is it any wonder that the public?parents, other taxpayers, students, and legislators among them?yearn for a serial, legible representation of the university, when even administrators and the faculty are enveloped and mystified by incongruous stipulations of what they should do?stipulations that they often did not posit?

In fact, while the proliferation of goals, dialects, and accounts seems to complicate assessment for excellence, it is not clear what the purposes of such assessment should be, especially at the level of the department. Many of us probably know the I-E-O theory (input-environment-output) that asks us to determine what value programs add to the student ?inputs? before they become sequential cohorts of ?gradputs? (as I say) (Astin 16?37). Since /A Nation at Risk /in 1983 (National Commission), the governors? /Time for Results/ in 1986 (National Governors?), and enabling legislation like Tom Hayden?s Assembly Bill 1808 in California in 1991, the states have enjoined universities to account for ?demonstrable improvements in student knowledge, capacities, and skills? in such a way that the environmental influence (that is, the university effect) is made visible to the public (California State). A few states have interpreted this agenda as a mandate for tests that yield quantifiable and standardized results in academic majors and general education. They have looked for tools that are comparable with the high school achievement and performance exams that increasingly determine funding at that level, as well as college entrance and placement tests.

But many states have shied from this approach (Lazerson 2?12). In the California State University system, for instance, /Cornerstones/ acknowledges that the faculty?s commitment to qualities of mind and character are ?most difficult to assess? and suggests that these effects of academic programs are captured best in reports that the public does not see: program reviews and disciplinary accreditation reports (4). In fact, the California Postsecondary Education Commission brackets?that is, steps around?the hows and whats of departmental evaluation and assessment. CPEC acknowledges in a note that such accounts exist but then reports numerical results for the performance indicators that it has established, most of which demonstrate the degree to which throughput at the college, university, and system levels demonstrates continuous improvement (/Performance/). Value added at the department level is nowhere to be found.

In the main, reporting bodies in the regime of excellence call for, yet step around, accounts of program quality because (a) they still acknowledge local faculty prerogative over content and measures; (b) the number and differentiation of programs are too complex to include in a

single meta-accounting; and (c) despite the rhetoric about I-E-O and value added, throughput measures?student credit hours, retention rates, and the like?still pay the piper (Lazerson 8?10). As a result, departments often have a wide range of options for determining both the substance and protocol of quality (rarely funded but always imaginable), although this is restricted by campus policies on program review, compliance with teacher certification, and satisfaction of accrediting requirements.

Unfortunately, the noise of excellence makes it difficult for colleagues to believe that there actually is institutional space for them to judge maturely what is the good, what its evidence can and cannot be, and who the audience for this account should be. Resentment against the threat of what will happen if we don?t assess (we will be punished), if we?re not proven excellent (we will be cut), if everybody is represented by a number in a merit index (we will earn less) corrodes the will to judge. Increasingly, chairs must distinguish performance indicators?which arouse rancor at the local level but rarely affect the local level of the department?from the call to exercise judgment at that level.

And why should chairs?and faculty members generally?do so? There are several reasons. First, in the humanities and social sciences, few departments are as skilled in the study and application of assessment methods?for students and programs?as English departments. The compositionists among us usually can tick off the pluses and minuses of portfolio review, varieties of immediate feedback in the classroom, metareviews of such feedback, holistic scoring and norming, and so on. Second, because of the army of full- and part-time faculty members that they supervise, the English faculty?especially program coordinators?knows first-hand the advantages of making the criteria of teacher evaluation congruent with student evaluation and program review. Third, many of us took, even if we despised, comprehensive exams in graduate school (and even college). On some level, we understand the value of such evaluation as formative and summative experiences and appreciate the knowledge that they can yield about the intentionality and effectiveness of programs.

Departments like English often feel excluded, relegated, or deformed within a University of Excellence, since excellence often entails the development of centers, which serve emergent sectors in the new economy of computers, mass communication, biotechnology, and so on (Gumport 34?36). Just as frequently, centers, emphases, or niches address regional needs such as small business development and bilingual education. On the one hand, service to the new economy and regional needs is old news: agricultural education pioneered the approach of taking instruction and research to the fields to improve practitioners and, in turn, brought practical concerns back to the campus for solutions (Rudolph 260?63). On the other hand, the degree to which universities have encouraged a broad spectrum of programs to adapt this approach indicates, first, how crucial local partnership has become to leveraging financial support?even statewide support?and, second, how budgetary exigency has led to the assumption of extension activities by regular operations without a compensatory increase in staffing.

These centers, emphases, or niches make up but the latest chapter in a long history in which American universities have strategized how to induce revenue streams from secular sources. But now tributaries are not just individual donors as well as the state; more and more, they are corporate sectors in leveraged partnership with government agencies. Here, continuous improvement becomes a process of identifying the chances for such ventures, modifying academic plans to capitalize on partnerships, realigning internal budgets as partial matches to external support, and serving ?customers and constituents? (Oblinger 31-68).

Humanities and communication programs can play either the entrepreneur or the ?service-oriented provider? successfully in this regime of excellence, although often their products and services are conceived as the basic skills that the university?s baseline should underwrite. That is, within this regime, they usually are neither conceived nor perceived as adding special value. In state universities?especially, Master?s I and Master?s II?the greatest stake of English historically has been with K-12 and adult education. After all, those whom we teach bless us with those whom they, in turn, teach or rear. It is the classic, cyclical partnership that justifies the department?s investment of intellect, energy, and department resources, even beyond the formal involvements that teacher credentialing requires.

Separate from that, English has a peculiar luxury in being able either to choose or refuse the niche game?for economic reasons that I?ll get to shortly. If niching in order to serve is in the university strategic plan for excellence, then faculty development and student development (through internships and field experience) should be the compelling reasons to engage. Ernest Boyer and his followers have detailed amply how such opportunities broaden definitions of teaching and learning and really do change careers (Boyer).

Like other exhortations to excellence, CSU?s /Cornerstones/ invokes financial ?crisis? as the principal reason we must engage in ?continuous improvement? if we are to meet the demands of the ?new economy? and the ?new demography? (2, 11). Although the document was written in the late 1990s, the CSU system?like public higher education everywhere?actually has suffered from a convergence of financial crisis with ongoing ?legitimation crisis? at least since the early 1980s (Habermas 1?3, 68?75). In the 1980s, Reaganomics devolved federal obligations to the states, shortly after tax revolts in the late 1970s began to constrict local revenues, so that localities, in turn, looked more and more to statewide funds to support K-12. It did not help matters that, inspired by the war on drugs, the states increasingly interpreted their constitutional mandates ?to promote the general welfare? punitively, not educationally. This erosion of funding for higher education exposed the extent to which the ideological wars of the 1960s already had corroded public trust in the civic purposes of the universities. It is a logical paradox yet political necessity that value-added and service-added emerged as responses of the universities to the erosion and corrosion of state support. Data indicate that, over the last two decades, public higher education?s percentage share of government budgets has decreased, as has its funding in constant dollars (Gumport 23?26; /Condition of Education 2000/, table 62?1; /Condition of Education 1997/, table 53?1).

There is mixed news in this for English departments. Part-time faculty members have increased significantly since the 1970s, not because centers of excellence have vacuumed all the funding?although, to some degree, this has occurred?but largely because state general fund support has decreased and increasingly has favored one-time disbursements (Laurence, fig. 2; /Digest/, table 230). Further, until recently many campuses were planning to gain a marginal but critical fund for continuous improvement when the 1960s faculty began to retire in the 1990s (Broad et al. 14). The timing was critical, for this phase was to come right before Tidal Wave II?in the first decade of this century?when higher education would require funds for more professors to meet greater student demand.

In theory, the difference between the retirees? final salary and the cost of new faculty members would be significant and therefore subject to reinvestment. The relatively high cost of new hires, however, and the outmoded rates with which states reimburse universities for FTEs have

eaten away at this margin. To put it bluntly, the more we grow, the more we fall behind. The more we fall behind, the more we add excellence in the hope of recapturing the legitimation that can restore the base funding that has been lost.

Despite the focus on the new economy, majors in the humanities have kept a relatively constant share of the pie since 1990; professional programs have decreased somewhat, and many engineering programs actually have tanked (/Condition of Education 1998/, indicator 29, chart 1; Horn and Zahn, fig. A). No one really knows the precise reasons for these trends. The failure of K-12 to prepare students for technical degrees, universities? disinvestment from high-cost programs, and globalization of the workforce are all possibilities. But students still choose to be English, humanities, and communication majors in numbers that, while down from the 1960s in terms of percentages, are significant and stable. Why so? Here indeed is a question for assessment and historical analysis. Gerald Graff has argued that, since the eighteenth century, scholars and teachers of the classics have adapted their studies to changes in society by vernacularizing their subjects (hence the study of English) and spinning off subspecializations by means of ?the field coverage principle? (5, 7?9, 22, 38, 42?44, 56?62). As a specializing profession, English has responded to new technology (technical communications), social need (ESL), and cultural change (American studies, women?s studies, etc.). We probably have been more mindful of niche opportunities than we admit (/Digest/, table 255).

Further, central administrators and deans, even if they are strong advocates of excellence, do know that along with the social sciences and math, humanities yields relatively inexpensive FTEs because the cost of their full-time-equivalent faculty members and operating expenses are relatively low (Middaugh, tables B.17 and B.18). Why so? Here is a question for invidious assessment and evaluation indeed! On the one hand, we can argue that English, like math, is easily exploited because it does good work for less cost. On the other hand, this is a sign of productivity in the game of excellence and?if the university is at least minimally rational?the productivity will be (somewhat) rewarded. At least at the undergraduate level, the niche remains relatively secure and successful.

Of course, we do not like to think of our programs in the raw terms of accounting, since that excludes what we are about. Nonetheless, I am certain that when English departments choose to play the excellence game for fun and some profit, they can show that their students?both majors and nonmajors?have a high satisfaction index, that their costs beat the campus mean, that some sector of the program satisfies regional need, that their graduates, while not necessarily the wealthiest, score low on white-collar crime and show a comparatively high return on the dollars the state invested in their education. (On satisfaction, see Bowen and Bok, app., table D.7.8.)

Horror of horrors, what happens if English, too, is most excellent? Does that mean that it has jettisoned the ?good??

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