

Ernest Lynton and the Tyranny of Research

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Perhaps it is a kind of supreme irony that Ernest Lynton, a physicist, identified the tyranny of research as the central culprit in the crisis of purpose of the American university. He was not lamenting the fundamental value of research, but instead the dominance that pure science as basic research has come to exert on narrow conceptions of what kind of academic work is valued—and, by insidious influence, on the homogenized organizational culture supporting basic research that has come to define quality in higher education. He surveyed the landscape of higher education in the 1980s and 1990s from the vantage point of a scientist-turned-administrator in a time of shifts in student demographics and questions about the role of the university in addressing a myriad of social issues. He didn't like what he saw. In particular, he saw how striving for a narrow organizational model shaped by the prestige of basic research had placed its iron grip (including support for a cult of specialization) on nearly every aspect of the university: its fundamental purpose, the role of faculty, faculty rewards, undergraduate education, teaching and learning, questions of impact, and the public relevance of the university.

The context for Lynton's article "Ensuring the Quality of Outreach: The Critical Role of Evaluating Individual and Collective Initiatives and Performance," written in 1996 for what was then the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, is that it came late in Lynton's life (he died an untimely death in 1998), at a time when he focused his attention on rethinking the faculty service role, or what he called "professional service." This article follows the book he published through American Association for Higher Education in 1995, *Making the Case for Professional Service*, and it anticipates the monograph that he was working on at the time of his death along with Amy Driscoll, who completed it without him the following year: *Making Outreach Visible: A Guide to Documenting Professional Service and Outreach* (Driscoll & Lynton, 1999). In a larger context, the *JPSO* article came at the end of a 20-year critical examination of higher education as Lynton worked to create a new model of the university, first as the founding dean of an experimental college at Rutgers University, and then in shaping the creation of University of Massachusetts, Boston, with the vision that it would be a distinctly mission-driven, publicly responsive urban university.

The article was also a continuation of Lynton's keen analysis of the developments in higher education in the latter decades of the 20th century that were undermining its public credibility and national importance. In the *Change* magazine article "A Crisis of Purpose: Reexamining the Role of the University," he wrote:

Higher education, and particularly the universities, is experiencing substantial alienation just when one would have expected unprecedented support. Our current distress goes well beyond the impact of demographic changes and cannot be explained in purely economic terms. These surface problems mask a deeper crisis, a crisis of purpose and a crisis of confidence. (*Lynton, 1983, p. 19*)

What he described as "deteriorating external circumstances" were, he said, "stripping away the protective layers, revealing the mismatch between our activities and societal need" (*p. 19*). What was urgently needed in higher education was "a modification and adaptation of priorities and values" (*pp. 19-20*).

The article should also be understood in the context of the period of the 1980s and 1990s when Lynton was developing his analysis and remedies along with colleagues at two main intellectual centers of ferment in higher education, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE). The two organizations shared a network of intellectuals, all academics with a broad vision of the public purposes of higher education, who saw the potential for higher education to revitalize democracy in ways that involved undergraduate education preparing students to be both career-ready and citizen-ready. Ernest Boyer was the president at the Carnegie Foundation, and Russ Edgerton was the president of AAHE. The Foundation served as the think tank, germinating ideas. AAHE played the role of spreading and implementing the ideas. Crossing between the two were not only Boyer and Edgerton, but other movers and shakers such as Donald Schön, Frank Newman, Lee Shulman, Gene Rice, Ted Marchase, Gene Alpert, and Ernest Lynton. It was within the intellectual ferment of interactions within this network that Lynton developed his analysis of higher education and worked toward implementing a new model of the field.

In the *JPSO* article, Lynton observed that "as long as research is viewed as the paramount measure of both collective and individual esteem and advancement, an institution will lack the flexibility of

deploying its resources in an optimal fashion to meet its multi-dimensional and complex mission” (Lynton, 1996a, p. 18). The analysis behind that observation was not new. Lynton (1983) had written about the consequences of growth in higher education “in the years since World War II, and particularly since Sputnik,” noting that despite the existing variety and dramatically increased number of universities across the country, these institutions “display a remarkable homogeneity of values which do not meet societal needs” (p. 19). “Maintaining the model of the classical research university as appropriate for hundreds of new and expanding institutions” and “the failure to examine the basic assumptions and modes of growth was largely due,” he observed, to the “enormous increases in federal support for basic and applied research in the sciences and engineering” (p. 20). Even though the federal research funds “went to a relatively small number of institutions,” he noted, “the pot of gold was there, and everyone scrambled for it” (p. 20). The result was that “success individually, and institutionally, in capturing research grants became a major measure—indeed perhaps the principle measure—of institutional quality” (p. 20).

This research culture “produced narrowly trained specialists” who were prepared in ways that reinforced “substantial isolation from the external world” and who “viewed their discipline as an end in itself rather than as a method toward broader goals” (Lynton, 1983, p. 20). The result of this tyranny of narrowly prescribed research with its “supremacy of cognitive rationality” and “epistemology... of positivism” resulted in the “current conception of the university as a substantially detached and isolated institution... able to determine our own priorities and objectives on the basis of our own internal value system” (p. 53).

Lynton (1990) wrote:

In the post-Sputnik era, every professional became a scientist and every occupation a science. We not only succumbed to the cult of the expert but defined such an expert in completely one-dimensional terms as someone who could find the unique solution to repetitive problems by rigorous analytic methods. (p. 4)

We also succumbed to the valuing of scholarly products such that the principal mechanism for dissemination “continues to be publication in scholarly journals,” what Lynton (1983) noted was “a trickle-down approach which is as questionable and limited in this area as it is in national economic policy” (p. 23). This narrowing

of scholarly work not only defined research, it “dominated all of our teaching” (p. 22) such that in what Rice (1996) would call the “assumptive world of the American professional,” Lynton (1990) wrote that “all else was seen as peripheral and largely irrelevant” (p. 4). In his final analysis, Lynton (1983) determined that “in the universities’ most cherished activity, the pursuit of new knowledge through basic research, time honored traditions and procedures must be reexamined and in many cases profoundly modified” (p. 23).

In part, that reexamination had to do with valuing the full range of scholarly activity that defined the faculty roles; and, in part, it meant rethinking how the scholar did his or her work. Boyer (1990) had opened up space for thinking about a fuller range of activities through which individual scholars did their work in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, which resonated strongly with Lynton. By 1996, with his essay “The Scholarship of Engagement,” Boyer himself had shifted his thinking away from what individual faculty members did to how they did it—“engagement”—and to the work of the institution as a whole. Some of that shift can be attributed to Lynton, who along with Schön, Rice, Edgerton, and others (see *Saltmarsh, 2011*) had been nudging Boyer away from a narrow conception of application—the expert knowledge in the university applied externally—to a more dynamic and impactful way to think about knowledge generation. In Lynton’s *JPSO* piece, he referenced “what Boyer calls the *scholarship of engagement*” (p. 18) and then discusses the qualities of engagement. Lynton advanced Boyer’s thinking in that Boyer (1996) was just developing his conception of engagement, and referred to its qualities as simply “creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other” (p. 20). For Lynton (1996a), engagement meant “some modification of standard approaches,” such that the “flow of knowledge is in both directions” (p. 16), from the university outward and from the community into the university. This meant an “interplay and mutual reinforcement of theory and application” was “needed for the optimal generation of knowledge” (p. 16) and came about through “working collaboratively with practitioners in analyzing and remedying problems and developing new approaches” (p. 17).

Lynton (1994) had explored this territory in an article in the journal *Metropolitan Universities*, in which he pushed back against the tyranny of research to claim that it was “the advancement of knowledge” that was “indeed the central concern of higher education, and... the defining activity of the scholarly profession”

(p. 9). Scholars advanced knowledge not only through research, but through teaching and through service. But to overthrow the tyranny of research, it would be necessary to attack a core assumption of basic research: that knowledge was created by experts in the university and was transmitted outward in what Lynton called the “flow of knowledge” (p. 9).

Regarding the shibboleth of the flow of knowledge, he observed that

the current primacy of research in the academic value system is... fostered by the persistent misconception of a uni-directional flow of knowledge, from the locus of research to the place of application, from scholar to practitioner, teacher to student, expert to client. (*Lynton, 1994, p. 9*)

This “linear view of knowledge flow inevitably creates a hierarchy of values according to which research is the most important, and all other knowledge-based activities are derivative and secondary” (p. 10). Citing Edgerton, Schön, and Boyer, Lynton wrote that “knowledge is not necessarily developed in such a linear manner” (p. 10). Instead, he argued, knowledge “is dynamic, constantly made fresh and given new shape by its interactions with immediate issues and concerns. It emerges when a number of disciplines are brought together in the analysis of a complex problem in a scholarly manner” (p. 10).

In dispelling the myth of a unidirectional flow of knowledge, he then made the case for an “eco-system of knowledge” (*Lynton, 1994, p. 10*) in which the university was one part of a larger network of knowledge centers. Within the ecosystem, new knowledge was generated through engagement with others.

In short, the domain of knowledge has no one-way streets. Knowledge does not move from the locus of research to the place of application, from scholar to practitioner, teacher to student, expert to client. It is everywhere fed back, constantly enhanced. We need to think of knowledge in an ecological fashion, recognizing the complex, multi-faceted and multiply connected system by means of which discovery, aggregation, synthesis, dissemination, and application are all interconnected and interacting in a wide variety of ways.

Knowledge moves through this system in many directions. There is constant feedback, with new questions as well as new insights generated all along the way, triggering new explorations and new syntheses. Nor is the process linear. The ecological system of knowledge is complex and multi-dimensional, often messy and confusing, with many modes of feedback and many cross connections. (Lynton, 1994, p. 10)

Perhaps more than any of his colleagues, Lynton helped to shape the way engagement is conceptualized and practiced today, defined by relationships between those in the university and those outside the university that are grounded in the qualities of reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and cocreation of goals and outcomes. Such relationships are by their very nature transdisciplinary (knowledge transcending the disciplines and the university) and asset-based (valid and legitimate knowledge exists outside the university). Lynton's understanding of knowledge and engagement led to an organizational logic in which universities needed to change their policies, practices, structures, and culture in order to enact engagement and advance knowledge.

Lynton (1996b) wrote that "scholarship should never have been and certainly no longer can be narrowly defined as consisting only of traditional, basic research" (p. 2). He was optimistic that the reign of tyranny of research would end, and a new model of excellence for universities would emerge. "There is every reason to hope," he concluded, "that by the turn of the century the priorities and the value system of American universities will have undergone a significant and highly necessary change as a result of their reconsideration of the nature of scholarship" (p. 3). Valuing faculty's community-engaged scholarly work and ensuring its quality, the focus of his *JPSO* article, would be one expression of the reconsideration of scholarship.

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