The Disciplinary Trench: What if there were no academic departments?

"If you stay in the trench, you can't see what's in front of you, let alone what's on the horizon."

Introduction

Reflecting upon many years of discussion about the state of American higher education, we noticed that it is often the very structures and principles that have made our model great that are potentially holding us back. How do we keep alive our traditions and all that they stand for – namely the foundational value of free inquiry as the source of true liberal education – without letting them inhibit our ability to respond to new intellectual and social contexts? What if we could step back and reexamine freely some of the foundational concepts that shape our institutions: shared governance, tenure, faculty unions, faculty hiring procedures, and academic structure (colleges and departments)? Are these principles and structures ones that we would design if we were granted the ability to start from scratch? Our hope is that we could explore such hypotheses with the spirit of curiosity that informs all areas of research and scholarly inquiry. Our intent is that such an approach might inspire, not threaten, even as we seek to understand why many in the academy feel threatened by change. By approaching questions as lifelong academicians, one from STEM and one from humanities, and using our own experiences as servant leaders as our "laboratory," we aspire to demonstrate that the spirit of creative inquiry that we bring to our teaching and scholarship is worth applying more broadly, at an institutional and national level. In our current moment, collaboration and conversation are imperative, as we all seek to serve our students and the future of our nation.

Framing the (Right) Question

Why is higher ed perpetually at a crossroads, a precipice, a pivot point, a crisis point? Is it because we are a community of thinkers and analyzers? Or a community of critics and naysayers? Or a community that is increasingly isolated (by its actions or inactions)? Or a community that is paralyzed by an embarrassment of intelligence but a fear of change and a distrust of those who would lead

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[1] *Across the Green* was started as a series of periodic letters from Provost Rosowsky to provide updates on current initiatives and information on topics of interest to the broader UVM academic community. Started in 2013, *Across the Green* was published three times per year during the six years Dr. Rosowsky served as UVM's Provost and Senior Vice President. The *ATG Brief* series continues in the spirit of this communication with topics focused on higher education and leadership.

them in change. Or simply a group that has stuck its proverbial head in the sand while the world changes rapidly, challenging us to run alongside or fall behind. Are we increasingly relevant or obsolete? Are we increasingly needed or marginalized? Are we organizing (or in some cases disaggregating or separating) ourselves constructively or destructively?

We believe that rethinking the academic department, the fundamental building block of the majority of institutions of higher education, may be a good place to frame answers to these questions.

What is it that is preventing our institutions, comprised of diverse groups of creative, smart, and dedicated individuals from changing the predominant narrative around the value of undergraduate and graduate studies? Are the problems we face examples of what design thinkers call "gravity problems," ones that are beyond our control? Or are many of the dilemmas we face self-inflicted or inadvertently imposed on ourselves? To what extent would a more rigorous reconsideration of the problems we are trying to solve enable a new vision for ensuring the positive personal and social transformation that all of our colleges and universities claim as a core element of our mission.

About the Authors, Missions and Motives

Years in the academy as teachers and scholars, and decades in senior administration behind us, we bring our complementary backgrounds and experiences to bear on these and other questions about challenges confronting higher ed. We confess an abiding love and deep respect for American higher ed, and sincere gratitude for the opportunities we have been afforded at our institutions. Friends for more than thirty years, our pathways have often intersected as we moved into leadership roles and sought guidance or perspective from an informed interlocutor with a different background. As we will discuss in another essay, one of the disincentives for academics entering leadership roles is the loss of a sense of community and collegiality, the ability to turn to a trusted colleague, to whom one can ask questions that may reveal our ignorance, or to whom one can share frustration or disappointment honestly without fear of reprisal. We are fortunate to have provided each other that sense of community as our careers evolved. Whether comparing perspectives from STEM vs. Liberal Arts, public vs. private institution, religious vs. secular institution, unionized vs. non-unionized faculty and/or graduate students, differences in our own academic backgrounds (English vs. engineering), or missions (land grant vs. Jesuit), in our conversations over the years we have long found intriguing commonalities in our challenges and opportunities. We have been each other's safe spaces and sounding boards and we are hopeful that sharing some of our conversations might spark other campus leaders to engage with the most challenging and most urgent questions before us.

Universities are fundamentally mission-driven institutions. In fact, most engage painstakingly in articulating mission, goals, and vision, as mission alignment provides the foundation for accreditation. Despite there being literally thousands of colleges and universities undertaking these exercises, mission statements are often strikingly similar across institutions of similar type. This is not a criticism, just an observation. And where institution type differ, common elements/themes are still evident, and commitment to mission is just as strong. Take, for example, our own institutions, a public research university (that holds both land grant and public flagship status) and a private Jesuit university. Admittedly both are mid-size comprehensive universities, both have professional schools including a medical college, and both have very strong liberal arts cores. But the missions of the two

schools are different. Pillars of the land grant mission are well-known: teaching, research, service (or: learning, discovery, outreach). The Jesuit educational mission stresses various charisms (or "gifts of the spirit") including care for the student as whole person and forming students to be men and women for and with others, especially those at the margins of society. Common to the missions of all land grant universities and all Jesuit universities is *service*. Both of our universities, like so many others, stand in service to audiences beyond our students. We have explicit statements about serving others, empowering individuals and communities, and elevating the quality of life of all people. We take seriously our roles of educating all in our community, closing health and wealth gaps, providing access to first generation students and the underserved, supporting those in need and those less fortunate, and expanding minds as well as opportunities. Despite our different embedded missions, how those missions are actualized are remarkably similar. This suggests common ground for our assessments of institutional practices, barriers, and opportunities.

The Enduring (and Long Suffering) Academic Structure

Why has our current system of organizing our institutions as academic schools, colleges and departments endured? Does it still make sense? Are the same driving forces, expectations, and constraints in play? Have our organizational structures evolved and by what processes did that evolution occur? In some cases, the impulse has been to add administrative units as new fields emerged. In other cases, under the aegis of "program prioritization," some have been sunset. Is a proliferation of programs and departments good for students, for faculty, for employers, or the university? Can universities function with so many different sub-cultures? Are potential efficiencies sacrificed? Are we broadening opportunities for our students or just confusing them? Are we creating too many choices? Are we inviting too many surfaces for tension between academic units, faculty, or disciplines? Are we slicing ourselves into factions that lack critical mass, too small to be visible or recognized, forced into a defensive posture lobbying for relevance? Are departments organized to engage in meaningful discussions around interdisciplinary education and scholarship? For faculty hiring or decisions about promotion and tenure? **If recent developments are any indication, at most universities, 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 department structure.**

As we consider ways of redesigning and rethinking the university to better fulfill our missions, we start with the most fundamental unit: the academic department. Is the department still the best basic building block for organizing the fundamental work that we do? One key issue – one of the "core confusions" that inhibit our institutions – is our tendency to conflate three central organizational models for our work: the department, the discipline, and the program. While these three things can be identical, we are increasingly seeing problems emerge when the meaning of these three terms diverges. Departments, primarily, serve *administrative structures.* Disciplines represent coherent areas of *research and scholarship.* Programs reflect how disciplines (or combinations of disciplines) *form curriculum to teach their disciplines or combinations/intersections of disciplines* (as with interdisciplinary programs). For example, while a Philosophy department is typically comprised of faculty who research and write about philosophical questions and offer students classes that form the major program in philosophy, such a one-to-one correspondence is not always the case. In our

experience, many faculty, however, presume that this alignment is as an ideal, the one and only way academic units must be organized, regardless of whether the context – driven by student needs or institutional type – suggests another reality. Even in departments where there is a strong degree of disciplinary and programmatic homogeneity, we often see more than one curricular program. In a Philosophy Department, for instance, we might see a specialized "Ethics track" or a "Pre-law track". Such tracks might lend themselves to more "applied" outcomes for the discipline, which as in the case of "pre-law" move toward connections with other disciplines.

The opportunities for more intentional combinations of disciplines has tended to occur in particular fields. For instance, many departments of Sociology and Anthropology would be small and perhaps lacking visibility to potential students *or* in professional circles as a result of their size. Therefore we often see these two fields joined into a single larger department offering two distinct degree program tracks. At Creighton, this combination created the foundation for launching a highly popular medical anthropology track, whose added connection to the professional area of medicine has furthered the growth of the number of majors and enabled additional tenure track hiring. Likewise, engineering departments often are more accustomed to housing multiple degree programs. Many CEE departments, for example, offer accredited degrees in both civil engineering and environmental engineering. MANE, a large department at RPI in Troy, NY offers individually accredited degrees in mechanical, aeronautical, and nuclear engineering. At some universities having smaller engineering schools, departments are eliminated altogether in favor of a "School" model within which students can earn any one of a number of different engineering degrees. Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH offers 9 engineering concentration areas in which one can earn a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Engineering in the Thayer School of Engineering. An innovative new program at UVM allows students in any college or school, pursuing any degree program, to earn a certificate in data sciences. The same program also allows a student to earn their degree in data sciences with a disciplinary concentration (focus) in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, or the arts.

Collaborative combinations can help bolster disciplines experiencing declines in student enrollments, which is regrettably the case with many humanities areas presently, and in particular in foreign languages. Yet many institutions persist with single stand-alone language departments rather than exploring how joining together could create greater intellectual breath and energy as well and a greater sense of community which is important to be able to attract and retain students. While one could argue that merging Spanish and French and Italian (or even German or Russian or Chinese) into one federated unit signifies a disrespect for the unique cultures and traditions these languages represent, given the woeful state of second language acquisition in the United States, faculty working together to support each other in their programs and scholarship may have greater success in convincing students of the inherent value of becoming bilingual.

Similarly, other humanities disciplines, despite often stalwart resistance to combining departments, should recognize the potential hazards of any claim to disciplinary "purity" in teaching and research. English and literary research and pedagogy relies frequently on philosophical or historical approaches. Theology draws from techniques in literary analysis. What, then, is the source of resistance to creating a School of Humanities within which ideas and opportunities – for students as well as for faculty – occur more organically? How often are we recruiting faculty having multiple

scholarly interests and seeking opportunities to interact with multiple departments? And how often do the cultures of those departments really welcome and support such interactions? Why should a scholar in political economics have to choose sides? Or a scholar in classics and religion. Or art history and European history? Or human geography and cultural anthropology? Or biology and computer science? Or biology and ethics?

The line between disciplinary and interdisciplinary is not always clear or permanent. We might wish to ask ourselves what opportunities we are missing in our research (discipline) and teaching (programs) by clinging to administrative structures (departments) instead of enumerating the reasons *not* to rethink our administrative structure, we might start by imagining the possibilities for faculty scholarship and for student learning.

Alignment and realignment: Faculty roles, perceptions, and opportunities

Faculty should self-organize, be supported and incented, and be provided with tools and resources to be successful. Moreover, faculty should participate in shaping the university's priorities, while recognizing that the board and president have authority and ultimate responsibility for decisions beyond those delegated to the faculty through shared governance or other articulated agreements. Our focus here is not on the financial and institutional support for faculty, but on highlighting opportunities for self-organizing, creating appropriate and enabling structure that provides the greatest flexibility and the fewest barriers to faculty and student success. Faculty should feel empowered to examine inherited administrative structures, just as we teach our students to interrogate received paradigms.

Typically, through board-authorized shared governance, faculty are responsible for academic matters including curriculum, academic policies, academic calendar, academic credits, degrees, honors, and to some extent departmental structure and definition, including faculty hiring (both full and part time), faculty status, and leadership. As such, the tendency for faculty to assume the alignment of department to discipline to program is understandable, particularly around the determination of curriculum or faculty status. Expertise in a discipline is certainly essential to offering rigorous programs to students and ensuring the quality of faculty. This is likely a central reason why we rarely see faculty governance bodies embrace the opportunity to consider departmental realignment. Why? What makes faculty steer clear of this powerful opportunity and stand only and resolutely for maintaining the integrity and isolation of their singular discipline? Why would faculty not jump at the opportunity to create new scholarly pathways and partnerships, entice students to exploring ideas from multiple perspectives, and create distinction for themselves and their university?

The answers are complex. To be sure, maintaining disciplinary standards is often cited, particularly in pre-professional fields where external accrediting bodies can drive decisions about internal curricular or personnel decisions. As noted above, too, disciplinary boundaries are often more fluid that is commonly appreciated. Rather, in our experience, the root appears to be fear: fear of change, fear of dilution or loss of relevance, fear that the discipline in which faculty have spent so many years studying may not be as "important" as it once was, fear that such a loss of status will lead to a loss of student interest and enrolments and a loss of resources (primarily measured in new or replacement faculty positions and teaching and research spaces). Many faculty (and we consider ourselves faculty

first and foremost) are formed by their own graduate training, much of which occurred at large research universities and a very different period in the history of American higher ed. That formation – a remembrance of "what was" – naturally shapes expectations of what "should be," even though the majority of faculty work at institutions that are unlike their alma maters. Regrettably, the environment for higher education is not what it was in the halcyon days of yesteryear. But the status quo, or the nostalgic ideal of it, is at least a "known," and during times of instability, such as our own, there is comfort in clinging to the known.

Institutions of higher education typically revere traditions, both their own specific ones and those in higher ed more generally. Traditions create identity. Yet at the same time, we promote our mission, which also shapes our identities, individually and collectively. Our mission derives in part from our tradition, but once again, they are not identical. Our belief is that for many of us, our organizational structure is the product of tradition rather than mission, of what has been instead of what ought to be. If our mission is to put the student and her/his learning at the center of all we do – or if it is to be a force for the public good – does our current organization support those goals? Above and beyond the financial viability of our current organizational structure, does that structure best serve those we claim to serve – whether it is students or the community or our own faculty and staff? Student interests, disciplines, employer expectations, expectations of faculty, criteria for reappointment, promotion and tenure (RPT), and even accreditation requirements all have evolved. Yet we seem, at best, to bootstrap our RPT procedures to account for transdisciplinary activity, IP creation and technology transfer, assessment of scholarly productivity beyond traditional peer-reviewed journals and books, and creation of co-taught courses.

What could we do differently and how might we do it? Some universities have experimented with organizing faculty around themes – whether groupings of scholarly disciplines (e.g., Health Sciences and Humanities) or so-called *Grand Challenges* (e.g., Environment and Ecology, Sustainable Development). Some have done this while maintaining traditional academic departments while others have moved more aggressively to supplant that structure with their new theme-based organization of faculty and scholarship. Institutions like Arizona State University are hailed positively but recent efforts to duplicate their model at University of Tulsa have been met with strong opposition. While it may be too early to assess the effectiveness of these efforts, the institutions are in a very small minority of those that have endeavored to change and should be acknowledged. They can also offer a roadmap to those who may be considering such conversations.

At University of Vermont, we launched the university's first pan-university institute, the Gund Institute for Environment, as a way of leveraging, energizing, and increasing the interactions among a large number of individuals and programs across our campus. UVM had environmental expertise in nearly every college/school. While the university prided itself on its environmental scholarship and outreach activities, a coherent strategy was lacking which resulted in far less impact and visibility for our scholars and programs. The decision was made to establish the Gund Institute as a vehicle for transdisciplinary research, scholarship, policy work, and outreach. Faculty would be invited into the institute (based on their scholarship not their academic discipline or academic unit) at different membership levels but would retain their academic (tenure) home. The Institute would facilitate, support, and enable research and scholarship but would not offer degree programs. This allowed the

university to move into this new model without the usual concerns/worries often raised by faculty. While only two years old, early indicators are extremely positive. The number of faculty collaborations across colleges is up, transdisciplinary research activity is up, extramural support is up, graduate enrollment and post-doctoral engagement is up, the number of scholarly visitors is up, research productivity (output) is up, philanthropic support is up, national placements of media stories is up, and visibility (statewide, nationally, and internationally) has greatly increased.

Whether the Gund Institute eventually evolves into offering academic programs, maintains its own faculty, or expands its current scope of environmental focus areas remains to be seen. Under the governance plan developed for the institute, this will be entirely faculty-driven. And whether the Gund Institute remains UVM's only pan-university institute also remains to be seen. The early success of this initial institute in engaging faculty, creating new opportunities, building support, and creating measurable impact certainly suggests that, properly envisioned and implemented, this can be a powerful model.

Similarly, at Creighton, a key part of our most recent strategic plan has been the inauguration of the Kingfisher Institute for Liberal Arts and the Professions. Because our Jesuit tradition stresses the inherent value of the humanities as foundational for a Jesuit education, the Kingfisher Institute has as its goal the breaking down of barriers between liberal arts pedagogy and research and the pedagogy and research practiced by Creighton's several professional schools. Created to be an incubator for new curriculum and research projects for faculty across Creighton's nine schools and colleges, the institute is already having an impact, contributing to an innovative new curriculum in the School of Medicine which highlights how arts and humanities can form better physicians. Faculty from English, History and Fine Arts teach in the medical school and the experience is inspiring them to create a new Health Humanities minor for undergraduate students, as well as collaborating with colleagues in Medicine to research whether and how humanities and arts approaches impacts the education of new doctors and their care for patients. The Institute's focus will be driven by faculty interests, allowing new avenues for continued collaboration and creativity beyond the boundaries of a single department or college.

The Disciplinary Defense: Rationale and response
(Transcending departments in service to students, scholarship, and mission)

Not all faculty members identify or resonate with their university's embedded mission. While they may be aware of the institution's stated mission and have heard the president or provost refer explicitly to it, they may or may not be aligning their teaching and scholarship to best support it. For some (e.g., faculty in agriculture, forestry, or education), aligning with the land grant mission may quite easy. But for others, particularly those coming from private universities, aligning with the land grant mission may be less obvious to a faculty member. Similarly, faculty with degrees from faith-based institutions may easily and authentically connect with the mission of a Jesuit institution. For those coming from other backgrounds or types of doctoral institution it may be less obvious.

Engagement in university mission must transcend disciplines, departments, colleges/schools, and faculty backgrounds. It should not be viewed as a demand or ultimatum. Rather, a university's mission can be an ecumenical rallying call that brings faculty together around transcendent themes

and goals. Speaking personally, each of us have certainly felt pride and a strong calling to our respective institution types. **The land grant and Jesuit missions are compelling, uplifting, and purposeful.**

While support for mission may be difficult to argue against, changing something as fundamental as academic structure is sure to generate opposition. As such, relying upon mission as a touchstone is critical for any consideration of change. Many voices may express concern over any plan that outright eliminates departments or replaces the current departmental structure, even if a case can be strongly made. Some may express concern, others may fear ulterior motives, while still others may dig in and resist altogether. Clear and regular communication coupled with authentic engagement of constituents throughout can help minimize both concerns and resistance. But it also would be helpful to consider in advance what some of those concerns may be, to be prepared with responses that are respectful, responsive, disarming, and ultimately compelling. Our belief is that the intentional and consistent alignment of any decision with institutional mission provides common ground.

Faculty concerns

"My discipline will be downsized, be marginalized, or disappear."

"This is part of the university's plan to eliminate our department/field."

"We won't be able to hire faculty in my specific discipline."

"Only those disciplines bringing in research funding will survive."

"I can't see myself in the clusters they are proposing."

As we consider the most commonly voices faculty concerns, we observe that these reflect personal as well as disciplinary uncertainty, paradoxically a reflection if not a by-product of the constraining departmental structure. For most institutions that have implemented cross-cutting themes, they have been most often designed to leverage the largest number of faculty, disciplines, and expertise. They may also provide fertile intellectual ground for new study and new collaborations. Participation can do more than demonstrate the relevance of traditional disciplines, they can excite people to engage with them. Change is not always the same as loss.

Clear statements about any plans to downsize or eliminate fields of study must be forthcoming from presidents, provosts, deans, and boards when any restructuring occurs. Clear expectations about disciplinary viability in terms of students, scholarship, funding, or other activities as they pertain to continued resourcing (faculty hiring, support for scholarship, staffing, etc.) must be similarly spelled out. Highlighting opportunities for faculty to have *greater success* under different organizational models can help reset the equation of change with loss. More and different collaborators, greater opportunity for collaborative teaching as well as scholarship, greater ease in developing multidisciplinary grants and a more authentic platform for their success, and even the potential for greater resource sharing are some of the many positive outcomes. Central support can (and should) be provided to encourage faculty participation in cross-discipline teams, pedagogy, and scholarship. Yes, this may be new for some faculty in some academic domains. Faculty who are comfortable in this space, however, can provide leadership, serve as exemplars, and help to facilitate these efforts.

Finally, reconfiguring or even abolishing departments does not mean disregarding disciplines. Effective cross-disciplinary work requires disciplinary strength. Tightly focused/defined academic programs can still coexist, as can scholar-groups closely aligned with a tradition discipline. It is not about which disciplines have value and which do not, or which deserve to stand on their own, and which do not. It's about how the disciplines are organized in an administrative structure that facilitates faculty success in research and teaching and creates better opportunities and outcomes for students.

Student concerns

"How will I know what major to choose?"

"Employers won't know what my degree means."

"Is this a self-defined major? I need more structure."

The elimination or reconfiguration of departments may appear to remove academic guideposts or the comfort of supportive faculty and student communities within the large university. These concerns can be effectively allayed by communicating how academic advising will be handled, how degree programs are defined and selected, where student services are being provided, and so forth. But above all, this could be communicated as a tremendous *advantage* for students, allowing wider access to great faculty across the university, the opportunity to more easily move between and combine traditional disciplines, and better preparation for a constantly evolving world of work and careers that demands students demonstrate a wide range of knowledge, skills and values.

While departments often provide students an academic "home," students are more likely to identify with their major program (disciplinary, interdisciplinary, cross-college, dual-degree) or pre-professional track (e.g., students are more likely to identify as "pre-med" than as a Chemistry major). Students can be similarly (and perhaps more effectively) supported with advising and student support services that are distributed according to program groupings or even campus location. Furthermore, redundancy of services (e.g., academic and student services staff in very small departments) can be eliminated and those resources can be more effectively distributed with the goal of improving student academic and support services.

Employer concerns

"I want graduates of a certain program, with a certain type of degree."

"Will the graduates have any depth of knowledge, or only breadth?"

Employers seeking professional degrees such as those in engineering, business, and nursing will still see students prepared and credentialed with appropriate (and accredited) degrees. And in our vision, students will still be able to pursue highly discipline-specific degree (e.g., BA in sociology, BS in mathematics) if they choose. But students will also graduate with thoughtfully designed baccalaureate (and higher) degrees that bring disciplines together, allow exploration and expertise to be developed in emerging fields, and create more well-rounded and work-ready graduates. These are not self-defined majors or a possible pathway for students to take only intro-level classes or any

other program of study lacking cohesion. They are purposefully defined (possibly with input from industry advisory boards and employers), academically rigorous, carefully curated, and outcomes-driven. In as much as we are advised that we are preparing students for jobs that may not yet exist, and for emerging fields that already bring together different areas of content expertise, such new configurations may be even more effective in preparing students for careers over their lifetime, rather than simply readying them for their first job.

Alumni and donor concerns

"What is the strategic value to doing this? Won't we look different from other universities?"

"I want to support my former department."

The strategic case for restructuring and administrative reconfiguration must be made and the plans rolled out to alumni and other university supporters, just as they are to other constituents. The elimination of traditional departments does nothing to diminish the value of their degree. To the contrary, the university is positioning itself to be more responsive, more relevant, more competitive, and more attractive to the best students and faculty. Driven by academic innovation and student success (not program elimination or budget reductions), the university can better show that it is committed to academic excellence, program quality, and national visibility/competitiveness.

Donors support students, faculty, programs, and facilities. Only in a small number of cases do they seek to fund an administrative department per se. They can still name programs, endow faculty positions, create student scholarships, and provide support for teaching innovation, study abroad, and faculty support. Their support is just as important. And there may be better ways to articulate and align the university's highest priorities with their philanthropic interests and capacity.

Breaking the Department Compartment: Foregrounding mission over tradition

If we had no academic departments (or at least if we had a chance to rethink the ones we have), we could (and, one might argue, should) start with a blank canvas when locating academic program clusters and supporting/enabling services. No longer constrained by inherited notions of disciplines or confined by campus locations (floors, wings, or buildings), we could consider student flow and faculty access, for example. We could consider how best to co-locate not only academic opportunities but also student services such as academic advising, tutoring, the writing center, registrar, student financial services, and career services. And we could consider how best to position staff resources (administrative, students services, IT, business/financial, communication) to best serve the largest number of students and faculty. Even if existing teaching and research labs are unlikely to move, we could reconsider how best to locate faculty and teaching spaces in the vicinities around labs or corridors between them.

No longer would we constrained by expectations that every department have administrative support, IT support, and a business manager. Requests for resources, whether for positions or for scholarship, would come from faculty across disciplines. Cases would be made on strategic need not historic practice, with decisions guided by opportunities rather than entitlements. No longer would students be forced to reconcile different academic advising, student services, or degree requirement processes

and procedures from each department. Retention would no longer focused students in a particular department, but about keeping students enrolled at the university, engaged, and on track for completing their degree.

Faculty hiring could be much more strategic, collaborative, and exciting. Shared vision, shared resources, shared support, and shared expectations for promotion and tenure would create an entirely new way to recruit and retain exceptional faculty. Our experience has been that new faculty are increasingly interested in holding appointments in multiple academic units. They are increasingly being trained as PhD students or post-docs in multidisciplinary fields. Some of our best faculty candidates often have research experiences and/or scholarship interests that cross disciplinary domains, responding to changes in extramural funding paradigms, emergence of new and exciting research questions, and both student and employer interests. The world is changing. Students have changed. Faculty have changed. Opportunities have changed. Disciplines have expanded, combined, subdivided, and led to the establishment of entirely new disciplines. The ways we do our work and engage with others have changed. Why do we still have the same system of academic departments[2] we had more than a century ago?

To be clear, we are *not* advocating for the elimination of academic departments. Rather, we consider possible barriers to such change and ways they might be eliminated or lowered. By asking challenging questions about why we do things the same old way and why we resist radical change (even when not that radical) in the academy, we can assess for ourselves – within our own campus communities and cultures – what make the most sense for our institution, our students, and our future.

Instead of enumerating the reasons *not* to do this, we might start by imagining the possibilities.

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[2] The Department of English at the University of Vermont was established as a separate entity around 1827, and according to university historian Julian Lindsay, was the first department of English literature in America. Harvard's English department dates back to 1876.

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