At times I have been given highly useful and detailed information. At other times I have been met with blank stares or incredulity. Even the incredulity was revealing: I knew immediately that the department or institutional entity did not value anything approaching self-aware self-reflexivity. Too much was assumed to be self-evident or natural. As John Stuart Mill might have reminded us, vipers and all sorts of vipersish activity exist in that realm of the natural.


"Power and Form": Learning and Unlearning the Lessons of the Academy

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Ralph Waldo Emerson opens his 1846 essay "Experience" with a lament that strangely speaks to those of us who are or have been academic administrators:

—but the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the key to drink, that we may tell our tale, mised the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now as our old age. Sleep longer all our lifetime about our eyes. . . . Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Groucho we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. (471)

As a recovering former academic administrator—I left my position of dean of Graduate Studies, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, at the College of William and Mary in 1996 to return to full-time teaching in English and American studies—I will try to shake off any remaining lethargy and tell some tales.

One of Emerson's most personal essays, "Experience" laments the loss of that resiliency and freshness of perception that he had celebrated only a few years before in such essays as "The American Scholar" (1835) and "Self-Reliance" (1841). "Experience" is written under a dispensing awareness of those internal and external factors that seem everywhere to limit human autonomy and free will: 'Dream delivers us to dream and there is no end to illusion,' he writes. Not entirely in jest, he tells of a "witty physician who found theology in the biliary duct, and used to affirm that if there was disease in the liver, the man became a Calvinist, and if that organ was sound, he became a Universalist" (473-74). But then, in a move that, as Gay Wilson Allen (156) has pointed out, anticipates the pragmatism of William James as reflected in such essays as James's "Will to Believe," Emerson asserts that "[h]uman life is made up of the two elements, power and form, and the proportion must be invariably kept, if we would have it sweet and sound" (481-82).

Those of us who work in administration, indeed, all those who contend with bureaucracies, know all too well the meaning of the term form, those procedures that govern all organizations in the modern world. Rather, the compelling and fascinating term is power. For Emerson, power is not the arbitrary use of the ability to command or direct, as we commonly use the term, but rather that creative quality, that imaginative vision, that renews existing structures and helps create the new. He concludes "Experience" by asserting that the "true romance that the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power" (492). Emerson's term power and form are helpful as we conceptualize the challenge of academic administration. Emerson refers to those established rules and structures, that heritage of procedure, that must be negotiated to transform it to achieve anything worthwhile against the arbitrary use of power, but imaginative power is necessary to overcome the tyranny of mere rules and the inertia of disciplinary structures.

One cannot, however, simply refer to Emerson's idealistic treatment of power without reference to Michel Foucault's complex analysis of this much debated term in his work. In books such as Discipline and Punish, Foucault has alerted us to the pervasiveness and ubiquity of power in the modern world, where it is dispersed throughout the organizations and structures of the modern state, including the hospital, the prison, and, not least, the university. Quoting Foucault's observation that the university "continues, on those entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through..."
innumerable mechanisms of discipline” (302–03), Vincent B. Letch has called attention to the position of university professors as disciplinary subjects working in disciplinary institutions in a disciplinary society (127). It is essential, however, to recognize that Foucault did not conceive of power in entirely negative terms. As he states in Discipline and Punish, "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms [...] In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (194). In the 1977 essay "Truth and Power," Foucault remarks that "truth isn't outside power: contrary to a myth [...] truth isn't the reward of free spirits [...] Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power." Power must always be seen as "a making possible," as an opening up of fields in which certain kinds of action are brought about. As power dissolves itself, it opens up specific fields in which the exercise of various forms of power is possible. It is through these forms of power that the institution of science and its discipline are constituted. In this context, we become the individuals, the subjects, that they make us.

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Foucault's analysis of power as contingent and situated in all institutions and in our own academic disciplines provides a useful balance to Emerson's use of the term as an abstraction, although Emerson's insistence on balancing power with form and his concluding use of the term "practical power" also calls attention to the institutional and disciplinary contexts in which power manifests itself. I take as given that in a world changing as rapidly as ours, successful administration is not only about administering what exists but also about taking the lead in promoting new structures. In a time of scarce resources, such leadership may come at a price. The American tradition of pragmatism may be useful in setting up standards for testing and evaluating those new units in the university. Have they proved themselves to be useful in the lives of students who participated? Have they helped create knowledge that is useful, however useful knowledge is defined? What discourse have they engendered? What is required to bring the new into existence?

In the late 1970s, as director of a small master's program in English, I helped prepare a periodic evaluation that called for, among other things, the creation of a master's program in American studies. Our external consultant, the late Richard Beale Davis of the University of Tennessee, provided the stimulus. The program would bring together faculty members from a number of departments, including English, history, sociology, fine arts, government, music, and anthropology, that shared overlapping interests in American culture(s) but were not regularly in dialogue. The recommendation found strong support in the arts and sciences faculty, and the dean of graduate studies asked me to chair the committee responsible for creating the new structure. Be careful what you envision; you may well find yourself negotiating the necessary bureaucratic structures and forms in order to realize it. In addition to my continuing work as a member of the English department, I spent two years writing the proposal to the Virginia governing authority for higher education and making the preparations for implementing it. I spent another three as the program's founding director.

I immediately discovered the immense difference between adding an established program and the creation of a new one. We had to ask a whole new set of questions and employ a whole new language. Who would our students be? What could we provide for them that would justify their expenditure of time and money? What benefits would there be for departmental faculty members to teach in the program and to advise students? What space could we secure? Since we were beginning the program in the midst of the recession that followed Ronald Reagan's inauguration, it quickly became evident that we could not obtain adequate graduate financial aid from the institution itself. We would have to be entrepreneurial and look outside the institution for student support and research opportunities. Success would depend on our ability to form research partnerships with external agencies, such as our neighbor Colonial Williamsburg. The new entity would succeed only if, to use the discourse of the business world, it brought value to everyone involved. Thinking about our project almost in terms of a business start-up, we had to leverage resources and find partners inside and outside the university. At the same time, we built into the curriculum from the first a critique of the politics of interpretation and representation in the academy and of such cultural institutions as museums. With that critique we began our interpretation of the American past. Such was our success over the first three years that the graduate dean asked the governing committee to consider the feasibility of developing a PhD in American studies. Only after assuring ourselves that graduates of our particular program would find suitable academic and nonacademic employment did our committee agree to develop a proposal.

After a five-year period during which I worried incessantly about the new American studies, I took a semester break to accept an external fellowship. In January 1986, I assumed the position of graduate dean. Among my responsibilities were securing the necessary state approval for the new American studies doctoral program, locating expanded space, and acquiring faculty positions and other necessary resources. Although I found myself immersed in a world of seemingly endless forms, I found the work meaningful, since the new program, launched in 1988, enriched my scholarly life.

In my new administrative position, I had to learn very quickly about the needs and methods of the natural and social scientists. One immediate problem we faced was what to do with a moribund master's program that seemed to be of little value to students. We decided to close it; it seemed to have no future, and no faculty champions were visible. I doubted that charges of euthanasia would be brought if one allowed this entity simply to expire quietly and painlessly.

First I asked what applied science was and what the specific institutional contexts were in which this program had been created. I discovered that in the early 1970s the architecture of our program was created as interdisciplinary, with two major tracks: computational science and materials science. Since there was especially strong student and faculty interest in computational techniques and the university lacked a computer science department, the program became a vehicle for bringing this comparatively new discipline into the university. But with the subsequent establishment of a computer science department, there was no longer any need to use the "applied science" rubric to house courses in computing. What was originally a peripheral endeavor had moved to the center. Letchy observes, "As long as there are disciplines (in the current sense), there will be interdisciplinary formations framed as minor offshoots and faced with precarious futures. And these futures will be structurally marked by the possibility of becoming disciplines and departments. The origin and end of interdisciplinarity is the discipline" (128).

Given the shifting nature of our discipline and the need to generate new formations to renew the established disciplines, I framed this question: Could the "applied science" rubric be reinvented to perform useful and challenging intellectual work? What about the original interest in materials science? Could a focus on materials science be a way to bring together colleagues in physics, chemistry, and computation? Applied science, I reasoned from the inside and outside, was the university, that was science that had to be just as rigorous as the work in the traditional disciplines, but in addition it had to be timely, given the rapid pace of change, and it had to find a use—that is, be applied in some meaningful and creative way. In two nearby federal laboratories—the NASA-Langley research center in Hampton and an accelerator, CENAF (now Jefferson Lab), in Newport News—we found partners who were in need of bright graduate students and willing to support them; who had on staff distinguished scientists eager to teach; and who were engaged in projects, from analyzing the sources of atmospheric pollution to creating lightweight materials, that were challenging and valuable by any measure. The first step for us was to set up a program, which we called GRASP Group to Revive the Applied Science Program. With high-level representatives from the external facilities, GRASP wrote a successful proposal to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia that envisaged the transformation of our moribund master's program into a doctoral endeavor that would offer work in polymer chemistry, nondestructive testing, and evaluation of materials, materials, which is what is called materials science. With our ambitious plans in place, we found ourselves facing a serious shortfall in funds as a result of the recession that hit at the end of the Bush administration, placing added pressure on us all to raise external funds. Construction of a much needed science building was delayed; we would have to make do with trailers. Authorization of the new facility on which we were dependent had to be postponed. Once again I saw the value of partnership.

The applied science program at William and Mary had joined with three state engineering schools to create an organization, Virginia Consortium for Science
and Engineering, or VCES, to being education in science and engineering to students around the state, both through on-site courses and videoconferencing technology. Together the four institutions submitted a successful budget initiative that among other benefits brought each institution two additional faculty positions—this at a crucial time in our program's development. The same principles of cross-fertilization of disciplines, openness to change, establishment of flexible organizational structures, and engagement with the world outside the academy that worked in American studies were integral to the new program as well. Within six years, applied science achieved departmental status.

Reflecting the continuing dynamic change in the academy, several years later the applied science department, along with physics, chemistry, and computer science, created an interdisciplinary cluster in a field known as computational science. The entity is based on the premise that advances in computing machines and techniques have changed the way that science is done. No separate degree is offered, but students can earn a certificate. Whether computational science will remain an interdisciplinary enterprise at the borders of these disciplines, fade away, or itself become a discipline and gain departmental status remains to be seen. But drawing on Emerson, I can say confidently: If the endeavor is to thrive, that is, "if we have it sweet and sound," those responsible for its development will have to combine "the two elements, power and form, and the proportion must be invariably kept."

During my decade as graduate dean, I continued to teach one course each semester—frequently The American Renaissance. Naturally I assigned Emerson's "The American Scholar," which identifies three dimensions of the scholar's continuing education: exploration of nature, interrogation of the past, and action. As teacher and scholar, I was committed to the second of these even while my administrative work was taking me into the public realm, which I found invigorating and stimulating. A central portion of my work was to think about how graduate programs across a range of disciplines were connected to a rapidly changing workplace. How well were we preparing students for academic positions and the world outside the academy?

I was impressed by the interest in this subject in the scientific and engineering communities, which regularly sponsored various seminars and forums examining the relevance of doctoral training in the face of a rapidly changing workplace both in industry and in government labs. A number of speakers gave compelling arguments that in many ways the training offered to graduate students in disciplinary doctoral programs was inappropriate for careers in government and industry. They insisted that dissertation topics were far too narrow, that students had the questionable luxury of seemingly endless time in which to complete their projects, and that students were not encouraged to work in groups. They urged a rethinking of the nature and function of the dissertation and suggested ways to connect the university and the nonacademic world.

Can we raise similar questions about training in the humanities? Do we encourage our students to focus too narrow a subject for the dissertation? Through lack of support and the demands of teaching on students, is the project drawn out unnecessarily? (No doubt the job crisis has contributed to the lengthening of the process.) Only recently have we seen departmental programs begin to seek internships for students in the nonacademic sector. Do we as academics operate in a culture removed from—if not actually hostile to and suspicious of—the power structures in the external world? There remains a perception that nonacademic employment somehow is second best, even though, as a report by Maren Nerad and Joseph Cerny of the University of California, Berkeley, points out, PhDs who find work outside the academy report levels of job satisfaction that are comparable to those who do find academic jobs (table 6).

The fact is that a significant portion of graduates in the modern languages and English do not find tenure-track jobs. For that reason alone we need to think of creative ways to engage the world of work outside the academy. Nonacademic employment, Rosanne Kennedy has argued in "Passion or Profession: PhDs and Alternative Careers in Australia and the United States," should not be seen as second best. Kennedy charges that we have produced "a culture of dependency in which students are made economically and psychologically dependent on their departments." We send conflicting messages to graduate students: "On the one hand, there is a belief that because people have chosen to complete a PhD, they are entitled to an academic job. On the other hand, graduate students and job seekers are expected to make almost any sacrifice to secure that elusive goal, an academic job. Both of these attitudes are extreme: one is extreme in its presumptuous sense of entitlement, the other in its sacrificial demands." Is this a classic double bind? There is no justification for privileging the work of the academy, important as the things we do may be.

The MLA Committee on Professional Employment has argued that academic departments have an obligation to develop ways to help students, those who wish to, prepare for the nonacademic world ("Final Report" 40). During my tenure as graduate dean, I did my best to assist graduate students in preparing for academic careers. In particular, I helped secure funding to enable them to attend conferences, sponsored seminars on the job-search process, and developed courses in teaching. I helped bring people from industry to the campus to assist our science students in learning about career opportunities there. I regret that I did not do more to encourage humanities programs to help students learn about the opportunities in business, government, and the nonprofit sector. Nerad and Cerny sensibly recommend that doctoral programs provide their graduates with "experiences in teamwork, collaboration, and organizational and managerial skills," since those skills are "as relevant to those graduates seeking academic employment as to those who work in business, government, and nonprofit organizations" (52). As administrators we know how essential are those skills—the skills of power and form. As scholars, we are in the position to understand and teach them to enhance the preparation of our students for careers both inside and outside the academy.

Works Cited