

Spring 2013

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Repository Citation

Schutz, A., & Butin, D. W. (2013). Beyond Dependency: Strategies for Saving Foundations. *Critical Questions in Education*, 4(2), 60-71.

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Beyond Dependency: Strategies for Saving Foundations

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Introduction

The foundations field cannot sustain itself in its present condition. A range of complex forces have combined to marginalize foundations over the past few decades. The decline of foundations as a separate discipline in schools of education has been abetted by the fact that foundations is generally a “service provider” to other programs. Over time, other departments have cannibalized our content while dismissing our relevance. To a large extent, we share responsibility for the decline of our field; we have failed to come together in effective coalitions to defend our importance. At times, the content of our courses has sometimes seemed narrow and irrelevant, but even when they are not, content alone is unlikely to save us.

We have generally tried to depend on the force of argument to win the day against the structural forces that have driven this decline. Yet foundations generally operates from a position of relative weakness in schools of education: we provide service to programs but generally do not have our own strong programs. We “take” enrollment from other departments, but do not “give” enrollment to them or bring independent enrollment to the school. This leaves foundations in a position of dependency. The core argument of this paper is that we need to move beyond dependency toward a vision of foundations as, at least in part, a provider of robust (if collaborative) programs of its own, and we discuss a range of strategies designed to foster the development of such programs. Amidst the current environment, we believe that foundations will find it increasingly difficult to make our arguments stick without the associated power to make ourselves heard.

This article is meant as a call to discussion and action. We begin with the belief that the foundations field is the best place in schools of education for rigorous and relevant examination of and engagement with issues of inequality and broader community-based issues as they relate to the context of schools. We outline the theoretical underpinning of this perspective and offer a case study of an already-existing program that has developed to the point that it could survive quite successfully even if all of the service courses were eliminated. We then discuss the potential lessons that could be drawn from this case study. While the situation of the department of Educational Policy and Community Studies (EPCS) is fairly unique, in the section that follows we discuss some general lessons for the field that we believe can be drawn from its experience.

The Decline of Foundations

The decline of the social foundations field in schools of education is neither new nor sudden. Already in the 1950s, just a little over decade after John Dewey and others pioneered a foundational perspective at Teachers College, the signature foundations coursework was cut due

to internal and external questions about its rigor, its lack of seeming value to the technical training of teachers, and to the seeming “un-American” attitude of critique.¹ The foundations field has, seemingly, not recovered since.²

Threats

The current climate could seemingly not be worse for foundations scholars. The federal government continues to focus on narrow standards and standardization; neoliberals raise questions about the need for teacher licensure; enrollment continues to fall in teacher licensure nationally; the number of foundations faculty and coursework is increasingly diminished and isolated; foundations content has become “diffused” in often problematic ways throughout the curriculum; and the very heart and soul of foundations work—examining the linkages between schools and a pluralistic society—is questioned and removed from curricular pathways and national and state standards.³

The standards movement has increasingly focused attention on the importance of subject-matter knowledge and “practical” teaching skills. Butin’s analysis of major education policy documents revealed “an almost complete lack of attention” to social foundations of education.⁴ NCATE and individual universities have succumbed to pressure from neoliberals and others, removing statements about “social justice” and other related terms from their missions.

At the same time, as the pressures from *outside* schools of education push foundations to the margins, the situation is complicated by the general appropriation of “foundations” content by scholars in other fields *within* schools of education. As Petrovic and Kuntz noted, “the influence of foundations on teacher education has been so strong and persistent that faculty outside of foundations have incorporated the vocabulary of foundations into their own scholarship and

1. Cameron McCarthy, *The Uses of Culture: Education and the Limits of Ethnic Affiliation* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

2. See, e.g., R. Freeman Butts, “Reconstruction in Foundations Studies,” *Educational Theory* 23, no. 1 (1973): 27-41; David Conrad and et al., “Foundations of Education: The Restoration of Vision to Teacher Preparation,” *Educational Theory* 23, no. 1 (1973): 42-55; Maxine Greene, “Challenging Mystification: Educational Foundations in Dark Times,” *Educational Studies* 7, no. 1 (1976): 9-29; Robert J. Nash and Russell M. Agne, “Beyond Marginality: A New Role for Foundations of Education,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 33, no. 3 (1982): 2-7; Jeanne Pietig, “How Educational Foundations Can Empower Tomorrow’s Teachers: Dewey Revisited,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1998): 102-06; Mary Anne Raywid, “Social Foundations Revisited (Book),” *Educational Studies* 3, no. 2 (1972): 71-83; Kenneth A. Sirotnik, “On the Eroding Foundations of Teacher Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 71, no. 9 (1990): 710-16; Susan Talburt, “Dewey, Identity Politics, and the Parvenue: Some Questions Facing the Social Foundations of Education,” *Educational Foundations* 15, no. 3 (2001): 47-62; Erwin Johanningmeier, “Through the Disarray of Social Foundations: Some Notes Toward a new Social Foundation,” *Educational Foundations* 5, no. 4 (1991): 5-38; Jonas Soltis, “A Reconceptualization of Educational Foundations,” *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 3 (1990): 311-22; Steve Tozer, “Toward a New Consensus among Social Foundations Educators: Draft Position Paper of the American Educational Studies Association Committee on Academic Standards and Accreditation,” *Educational Foundations* 7, no. 4 (1993): 5-22; Steve Tozer and Debra Miretzky, “Social Foundations, Teaching Standards, and the Future of Teacher Preparation,” In *Teaching Social Foundations of Education: Contexts, Theories, and Issues*, ed. Dan W. Butin (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3-28.

3. See, e.g., Dan W. Butin, “Is Anyone Listening? Educational Policy Perspectives on the Social Foundations of Education,” *Educational Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 286-97; Dan W. Butin, “Dark Times Indeed: NCATE, Social Justice, and the Marginalization of Multicultural Foundations,” *Journal of Educational Controversy* 2, no. 2 (2007), <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/v002n002/a003.shtml>; Kathleen Demarrais, “‘The Haves and the Have Mores’: Fueling a Conservative Ideological War on Public Education (or Tracking the Money),” *Educational Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 201-40; Erskine Dottin et al., “Representing the Social Foundations of Education in NCATE: A Chronicle of Twenty-Five Years of Effort,” *Educational Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 241-54; Aaron M. Kuntz and John E. Petrovic, “The Politics of Survival in Foundations of Education: Borderlands, Frames, and Strategies,” *Educational Studies* 47, no. 2 (2011): 174-97.

4. Butin, “Is Anyone Listening?”; Dan Butin “Guest Editor” Introduction: How Social Foundations of Education Matters to Teacher Preparation: A Policy Brief,” *Educational Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 214-29.

teaching in multiple ways, often considering themselves qualified to teach foundations.”⁵ Inside schools of education, those who support “foundations” in a general sense may increasingly resist the implication that they need foundations faculty to provide this content. In our experience, then, even when non-foundations faculty generally support the overall content and conceptions foundations faculty teach, they may increasingly question the uniqueness of the expertise that foundations faculty bring to the table. While this is helpful to the sense that it integrates foundations content throughout the curriculum, it also may tend to “water down” this content as presented by non-specialists.

More broadly, it is important to understand that licensure programs are under pressure from falling enrollments nationally. In the most recent data available, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that education was the *only* field in which fewer bachelor's degrees were awarded in 2009–10 than in 1999–2000, and we know that budget pressures on teaching positions as well as public denigration of the field has only increased since then.⁶ The challenges created by this general fall in the number of students has been intensified by increasing competition among universities for the enrollment that remains, and the emergence of the for-profit sector of higher education. The need to maintain enrollment to sustain faculty lines can make licensure programs increasingly concerned about the “cost” of the credits “taken” by foundations.

As tightened budgets force most schools of education to over-emphasize enrollment, from a purely pragmatic perspective, then, it is unlikely that any field can thrive by depending only on service courses in the current economic and policy climate. If a licensure program can't find new enrollment, an obvious place to look for cuts is to service classes that can increasingly seem to be “stealing” credit hours. Foundations, which usually is only a service department (if it is even a department) with few faculty, is an obvious choice to dismantle and reconstitute within other more “necessary” coursework.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, we believe that there are a number of opportunities for foundations departments that can think creatively enough to take advantage of them. There exist a range of non-licensure areas related to education that traditional teacher education departments are not really equipped or flexible enough to address. What we teach (“Introduction to Education”) is actually the most expansive and interdisciplinary area in a School of Education (“Schools and Society”) and thus most amenable to reaching out to community partners and across the liberal arts. Our so-called weakness—our focus on contextualizing the schooling process—is an incredible strength for understanding issues of family & community engagement better than most others in a School of Education.

Foundations-related content may also be easier to offer in online formats, and may not require “cohort” models or coherent series of courses that have to be taken in a particular sequence. Increased flexibility may make programs more feasible for the growing number of adult-returning students who need options more responsive to the constrained schedules of full-time workers with families.

In fact, the content of foundations courses, when they address the social contexts and

5. Petrovic and Kuntz, “Politics of Survival,” 191.

6. National Center for Educational Statistics, “Undergraduate Fields of Study,” in *The Condition of Education* (Washington, DC: Author, 2012), <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/>.

forces that lead to oppressive contexts in many communities and schools, may be especially attractive to non-traditional students from marginalized communities, providing an opportunity to diversify schools of education. And less specialized foundations courses may be of more interest to a wide range of students across the university in first-year seminars and elsewhere, providing an opportunity to draw enrollment into courses.

Educational Policy and Community Studies

Educational Policy and Community Studies (EPCS), at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, was formed in 1984 from a merger between two departments: Community Education and Foundations of Education.⁷ The Foundations department was fairly traditional at the time, offering an MS in Cultural Foundations of Education with core courses in philosophy, sociology, history, and research. Community Education, in contrast, was quite unique.

Community Education was created during the activist days of the 1970s by a new dean who had worked with gang members from the Blackstone Rangers in Chicago. The dean brought another community worker with him up from Chicago to work on creating a BS program to train people who would work in the community. Other staff were hired, and extensive collaborative work was done with community organizations to develop the program. What eventually resulted was a program designed for adults. It gave credit for Prior Professional Experience and held few traditional classes—most of the work was done as part of internships in local agencies. This open-ended vision lasted only a few years, after which the university hired more traditional professors to run the program and a more traditional selection of courses was offered. However, the option to earn credit for educational experience remained, and the program remained focused on adult students, offering evening and weekend courses. Originally the program had two focus areas: Child Care and Community Change, but the child care side declined over time. The core courses focused on community education and community organizing. In the years to come the program maintained its reputation for sensitivity to the needs of low-income students of color.

EPCS began in 1984, then with a strong and distinctive Bachelor's program and a fairly standard Masters program. In 1998, the original faculty began to turn over fairly quickly to the point that in 2006 all of the old faculty had left. Nonetheless, the new faculty—one of the most diverse on our campus—maintained the core commitments of the program.

Around the time that Schutz achieved tenure, in 2001, the department sustained fairly stable enrollment in its BS program but faced low enrollments in its MS program. One year, Schutz had only two students in the required philosophy of education course. Worried about the future of the program, Schutz took over the MS program and began to aggressively market the program. While enrollments increased, given the national context of foundations it seemed prudent to do what could be done to shore up the department's enrollment and ensure its larger survival. Because BS students often continued into the MS program, strengthening the BS program also strengthened the masters. Most of these changes took place after Schutz took over as chair in 2006, when the department collaboratively took the following steps:

7. See Richard H. Davis, "The Failures of Compensatory Education," *Education and Urban Society* 4, no. 2 (1972): 234-38; Ian M. Harris, "An Undergraduate Community Education Curriculum for Community Development," *Journal of the Community Development Society* 13, no. 1 (1982): 69-82; Ian M. Harris, "Growing Foundations Through Community Education," *Educational Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 254-63.

Created Full Online Options

EPCS progressively placed first the core courses for the BS program and then the core courses for the MS program online, so that the entire program could be completed online. This was assisted in the case of the BS program by a grant obtained by a reinvigorated child care program based partly in EPCS. A few professors had already been putting courses online, and it quickly became clear that online courses were the ones that were most likely to fill. The fact that summer courses, which pay faculty extra, increasingly were only filling in the online format provided another important incentive. Today approximately 1/3 of the department's courses are online.⁸ The department made a commitment to offer a face-to-face option as well, offering required courses in the MS program in one format or another on a bi-yearly basis (although increasing enrollments now allows us to often offer them in both formats every year).

Most of our students don't complete the program fully online, and most students come from the local area. But quite a few would not have even looked at our program unless we offered such an option. They think they want a full-online program. At the same time, however, extending on the "Long Tail" point, above, we are increasingly drawing students for our MS program nationally. The decline of foundations programs means that students in many areas simply cannot access our content locally. And we are one of (if not the) only full-online option in our area in the U.S.

For those who resist the shift to online, it's important to emphasize that online courses can be done well or badly. Most courses operate on a weekly asynchronous discussion model where students first post their own perspectives on the material for the week and then respond to others' posts. In our program, at our best, there is actually more participation in our online courses than face-to-face because online no student can "sit in the back of the room" and be silent—they are all required to post and respond. Furthermore, the technology of the online format is progressively improving. Students can engage in synchronous chats; professors can live-cast lectures and discussions, actually bringing some students into the room with them and allowing others to participate through the chat system; and there are increasing options for video chat with groups of students. Over time, the divergence between the online and face-to-face options are likely to decline.⁹

Repackaged Existing Courses into Coherent Concentrations

The offerings of the department have always been quite diverse, with courses in race relations, alternative education, community organizing, community-based organizations, community engagement, youth work, and more. The department drew these courses together into coherent offerings that it then "sold" as essentially new degrees, using our BS and MS programs as general umbrellas. To some extent, these new programs provide structure to the extensive set of electives that were always part of both degrees. The concentrations include: Alternative Educa-

8. Some have raised concerns about a "digital divide," questioning how this online approach serves low-income students. EPCS has anecdotally found actually the reverse: more privileged students tend to complain the most about online courses. They have the time to come to class and are less burdened by job and family responsibilities. Some students, however, simply are not prepared to keep up with the online approach, which is why EPCS offers a face-to-face pathway as well.

9. Online courses are more work to create and to administer, however. As a result, we run these courses with somewhat smaller enrollment caps than our face-to-face courses. We also agreed to share courses between faculty, acknowledging that at any point one of us might end up having to teach a new course that someone else developed. Overall, the load has been relatively balanced, with most faculty members creating at least one course.

tion, Child Care, American Indian Education Policy Studies, Community Organizing, Community Engagement and Partnerships, Educational Policy, Policy and Leadership in Community-Based Organizations, Gender and Education, Race Relations, and Youth Work. With each concentration, we evaluated whether it fit our overall mission and whether we had sufficient courses to support them. For example, we have a number of students interested in international education, but we don't currently provide sufficient content to support a formal concentration.

Of course, we did not have enough courses within our own department to create many of these concentrations. Most involved some level of collaboration with other departments and programs. This put us in a somewhat unique position—we were coming to other units *with* potential enrollment instead of trying to cannibalize their enrollment. As our offerings diversify, we are able to find new areas of collaboration with other departments in the university. For example, we created a collaborative program with Social Work in Child and Family Services for students who couldn't realistically complete a BS in Social Work. These students will both help diversify agencies (like foster care) that often hire non-Social Work BS graduates, and create a new potential pool for Social Work MS students (thus serving their self-interests). We are working on potential collaborations with the School of the Arts on a concentration in "Public Art," partly generated by an increasing number of art students in our program and the lack of enrollment in the School of the Arts for them to start a program on their own. And we are in discussion with the new School of Public Health about ways we can supplement their offerings in the areas of Community Organizing and Action Research.¹⁰

We added as few new courses as possible within our department and began with those that required the least addition of resources—in some cases we were able to create concentrations without adding any new courses at all. Undergraduate courses were changed to "graduate/undergraduate" courses so that these concentrations could span both programs.

Part of what EPCS is doing is seeking out the "long tail" in the distribution of students seeking different programs. Traditional programs depend upon a large number of students in a single identifiable area to survive. Our department, however, provides concentration areas that overlap with each other and that have enough electives that students are taking courses across different areas and across undergraduate and graduate lines. As a result, no single concentration area needs to attract a full cohort of students to survive. Instead of focusing on a single robust area, we are able to cobble together enrollments by drawing on a range of interests.

Furthermore, the core licensure areas are those with the most competition from other institutions. The areas our department focuses on are generally those that are not offered by many—if any—other universities. They do not seek them out because they are not obvious sources of robust enrollment. As a result, in the areas of Youth Work, Race Relations, BS-level Community-Based Organizations, MS-level Community Partnerships, and others, we are really the only game in town.

Focused on Non-Licensure Arenas Related to Education

Most of the new concentrations EPCS has developed are ones largely ignored by tradi-

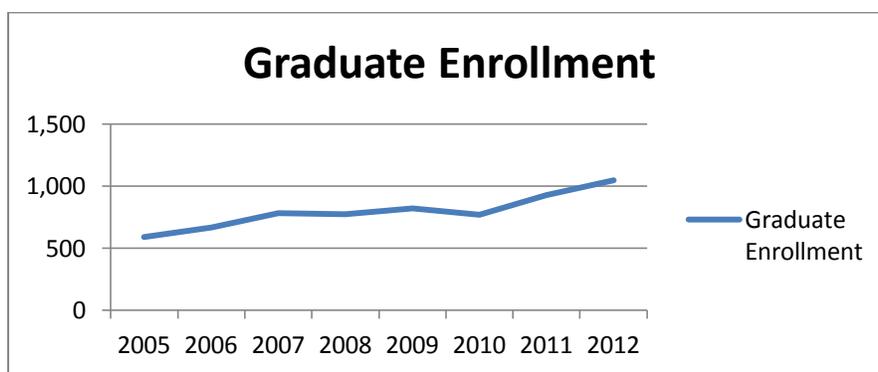
10. It is important to note that EPCS approaches other units with offers of collaboration, and generally ask "what part would you like to play" instead of trying to pre-define their participation. When framed in this way, other departments are less likely to see such programs as trespassing on their turf and less likely to want to block them. In fact, other units often recognize their limited additional capacity, and, in Schutz's experience, are open to letting someone else do the groundwork to put the program together and offer most of the courses. If you tell them you are in charge, they will often want to take over or block. If you tell them they can participate in any way they want, they often are more likely to want to keep their participation relatively limited.

tional teacher education. These are areas that Curriculum and Instruction departments (C&I) are not well equipped to address. We take the stance that we are “schools of education, not schools of schooling,” and that arenas ranging from community engagement, to community education, child care, and youth work are fundamentally educational even if they fall outside the purview of standard visions of education.

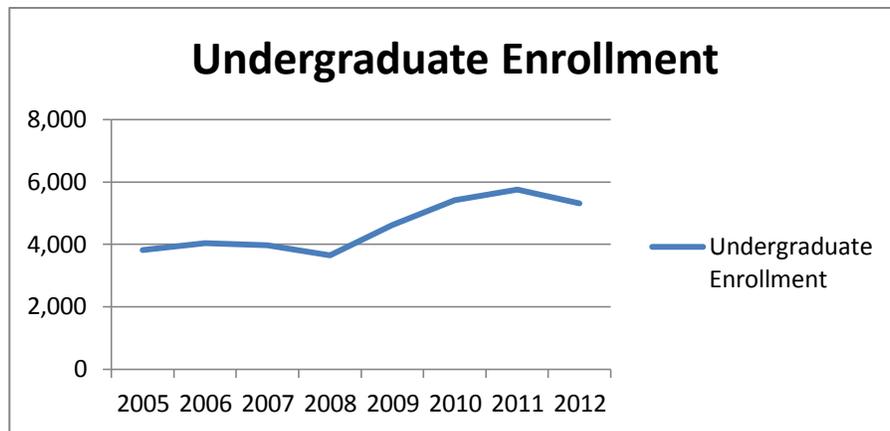
Note that those working or interested in these areas are often much more deeply rooted in their communities, in their social context. These areas provide a real opportunity for a revitalization of foundations: examining the distinctive interconnections between schools and their local communities and expanding foundations into new areas where expertise in community and multicultural issues could be a real asset. It is also important to emphasize that, at least in urban areas, these programs draw the kind of diverse student body (in terms of race, class, age, etc.) that traditional licensure programs have failed to attract or serve. In a field dominated by white women, we bring extensive diversity to the school of education, which also contributes to our importance to the school.¹¹

The department also took its intro-level courses and marketed them to existing undergraduates across campus. We especially focused on one course, The Milwaukee Community, which fulfilled General Education Requirements for students from some schools across campus. Enrollment exploded in these courses, and they became opportunities for recruiting students to our BS program.

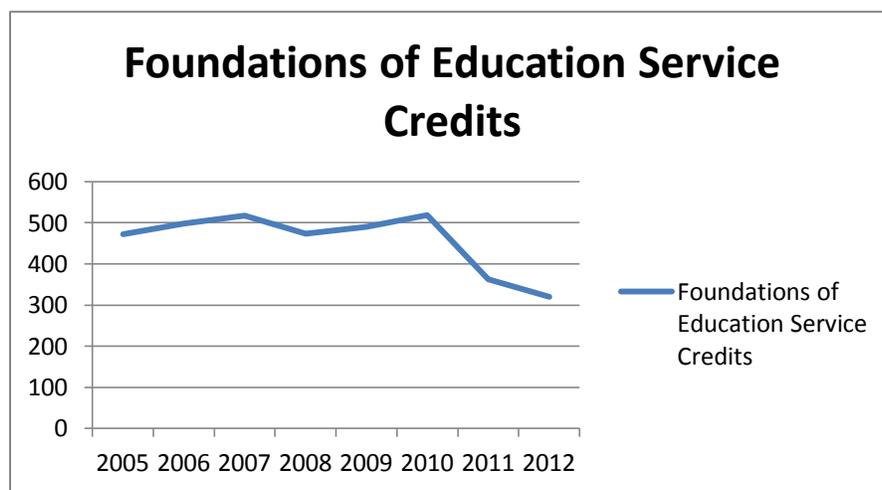
As a result of all these efforts, our department has increased its graduate enrollment by 77% since 2005-06 (the year before we began our major program changes) and increased our undergraduate enrollment by 40% over the same period. Note that most of our enrollment increase on the graduate side has been from students in our MS program, while the largest proportion of increase on the undergraduate side has been from non-majors taking our introductory courses. Of course, the increase in non-majors has also created a pipeline as these students decide that they would like to pursue our entire major.



11. Although it is a bit tangential to this overall argument, we also emphasized our prior learning assessment option. Older adult and returning students, facing the long haul toward a bachelors, are especially interested in opportunities to earn credit for their prior learning. With its longstanding PPEE prior learning assessment process, EPCS is able to attract students who might otherwise go to other programs because of this option.



This comes at the same time as the rest of the school has faced consistently flat or declining enrollments across the board, partly leading to significant declines in the service courses we offer. In fact, our enrollment increase comes at the same time as enrollment in our core service courses, Ed Pol 375: Foundations of Education, and Ed Pol 530: Urban Foundations of Education has fallen by approximately 32%.¹²



Perhaps for one of the first times, then, a School of Education has been depending partly on Foundations for the enrollment boost it needs to sustain itself. What EPCS has shown is that when it frames itself better for prospective students, concretely showing what different areas the degree is relevant to, foundations is perfectly capable of attracting its own independent enrollment.

In fact, as the requirements and strictures of other programs increase, many students find us out of a desire for more control over their courses and their schedules and out of a desire to go beyond “nuts and bolts” courses. In other words, the pressures that are partly responsible for the

12. This includes both declared teacher education and non-EPCS students, some of whom may be moving toward the teacher education program. If we looked only at declared teacher education students our numbers have fallen almost 39%.

attack on our service courses are, at the same time, sending students to our programs. Many students in our programs, for example, work in local community agencies and might otherwise have sought out social work degrees. But the requirements of these degrees, coupled with the fact that they already have jobs in their areas of interest, and the fact that their positions don't actually *require* a Masters in Social Work (MSW) mean they end up in our program (even when we tell them—and we do—that an MSW might serve them better).

Generalizing this Case Study into Possible Strategies for Other Programs

Few other foundations programs start with the robust set of resources contained in EPCS. However, it is important to stress that in developing its range of options EPCS had to be creative with what it had, and had to reach out to other departments for collaborations. We did what we recommend for other foundations departments: we framed our interdisciplinarity not as a weakness but as a strength, as faculty across the liberal arts increasingly do. We would argue that a carefully “grounded creativity” is the key to success. Programs need to do their own Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analyses stressing the particulars of their own faculty, university and community context, and more. Keeping this in mind, possible strategies for others include:

Take Advantage of Existing Spaces for New Programs

Some schools of education have an “Educational Studies” option that serves as a kind of “catch all” BS for programs that don't fit precisely within existing departments. This can be an opportunity for foundations faculty to create their own programs. Even within more traditional existing BS programs there may be opportunities for the creation of non-licensure degrees. The key is to treat an existing degree program as an “umbrella” for the creation of your own new focus areas as EPCS did. This means that you don't need to go through the effort to create an entirely new BS program. (You can try to start with “certificate” programs, but we have found that these tend not to attract much enrollment by themselves.)

Examine and Value Your Own Unique Capacities

Every collection of foundations faculty has its own set of capacities and expertise. What are yours? Perhaps you have an expertise in new media, for example. Could you create a concentration out of this? What about race relations and education? Community engagement? Are there faculty not formally in foundations that are sympathetic to your concerns, possibly tired of what they have been teaching for a long time, and open to collaborating with you on creating more creative options?

Start Small and Use Existing Courses

Begin with focus areas that can draw as much as possible on what you and other departments already offer. It will take a while for enrollment to grow. Once it does, it will provide a base for expanding more.

Seek Out Collaborations with other Departments

Existing programs with declining or sub-par enrollment are always looking for non-majors to fill their existing courses. Seek them out. If you can bring new enrollment to them for courses they already offer, it becomes a “win-win.” They get enrollment, you get a new program.

Make Your Offerings More Accessible

Offer your courses online, on weekends, etc. We are beginning, for example, to look at half-semester courses, since students are often looking for a course half-way into a semester to maintain their financial aid after bailing out of a course that wasn’t working for them.

Focus on Serving Non-Traditional Students

With a declining number of traditional students coming out of high school, non-traditional students are becoming the new “traditional” student. But many programs are not designed to serve them, and traditional licensure programs are often constrained by how flexibly they can offer their courses. Again, foundations courses focused on issues of race and inequality and open to the experience and wisdom of their students are especially attractive to low-income students and students of color who may not feel welcomed or appreciated in other areas of the university.

Seek General Education Credit for Your Courses

Many students are interested in a range of issues related to education, and foundations courses are a perfect place for them to encounter this, especially as first-year students. When you catch students early, you can draw them into your other programs.

Conclusion

We worry that foundations faculty and programs have at times become complacent in a standard set of offerings. But foundations as a field is unlikely to survive by keeping its head in the sand. Perhaps some foundations faculty are also hampered by a sense of defeat instead of one of possibility. Many foundations faculty may not believe that many students would be interested in their content if they weren’t forced to take it in service classes, since we generally don’t provide the “nuts and bolts” skills of the licensure programs. This can be intensified by a reluctance (and perhaps a lack of sufficient energy) to envision how to relate rarified areas like “philosophy of education” to issues and contexts that students really care about.

What the EPCS experience shows is that, at a time when most programs are intensifying their focus on the “nuts and bolts,” many students still crave a broader and more in-depth understanding of the contexts in which they work. EPCS faculty sometimes say that “other programs tell you what to do. We help you understand why these problems exist, and then *you* need to figure out what to do in your own unique context.” Many students prefer this approach, especially at the graduate level.

Politically, in schools of education, if you don’t bring your own enrollment to the table

you will find it increasingly difficult to compete for faculty lines. This is a reality that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. We need to face this reality and find ways to develop our own enrollments if we want to survive and flourish. We need to shift our paradigm away from dependency.

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