

The World of Education Podcast

Episode 1.8: Instrumentality

Guest: Ethan Schrum, Associate Professor of history at Asuza Pacific University in California

*This week's guest on The World of Higher Education Podcast is Ethan Schrum, Associate Professor of history at Asuza Pacific University in California. Ethan is the author of a very nice work called *The Instrumental University: Education in the Service of the National Agenda Since World War II* which puts into perspective a very important piece of the history of higher education in North America.*

We're used to universities making big claims about being "essential" societal institutions, valuable tools, "instruments" for the state to achieve its goals. At one level, these claims go back to nineteenth-century Germany and the vaunted Humboldtian system. But Germany's was still a model where the state benefitted from universities being as 'Ivory Tower' as they could possibly be. Fast forward into the 21st century, and the claim to instrumentality stems specifically from the very opposite – from the talent institutions display in engaging directly with multiple outside parties, be they firms, communities or governments.

Nowadays, claims to instrumentality usually centre around universities economic contributions either in geographic terms – "where would this small/medium town be without us", or in innovation terms – "our research catalyzes high tech growth" and in the past decade or two a lot of this has focused specifically on STEM research fields. This focus on economics and interactions with firms has caused some people to deride the very idea of both instrumentality and STEM as "neo-liberal", and to pine for some previous era where STEM was less dominant and universities didn't engage so much with the outside world (or at least with profit-making firms).

The Instrumental University is a bracing riposte to this view of the world. Ethan brings us back to the period between the 1920s and the 1960s where the notion of instrumentality first emerged. Instrumental Universities 1.0, it turns out, was rooted in progressive politics and was mainly focused on the social sciences. Indeed, the social sciences were deeply shaped by this experience, as they produced some of the earliest and largest instances of inter-disciplinary research teams, housed in what came to be known as "Organized Research Units", the precursors of Centres and Institutes in the modern university.

It's a fascinating story, from its beginnings in the progressive movements of the 1920s through to its exhaustion in the disappointments of high modernism in the late 1960s, and Ethan is a talented historical guide. You can listen to the full recording [here](#).

Alex Usher (AU): Ethan. Hello. Thanks for being with us.

Ethan Schrum (ES): Hi. Thanks for having me.

AU: In the introduction to your book, you write "today, those who decry university's corporatizing and market driven tendencies often trace them to the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s. This book suggests that a fuller explanation of these tendencies, particularly organizational changes within universities from 1940s onwards might highlight their deeper roots in the technocratic progressive tradition." Tell us about those deeper roots. Do they come from 19th century things like American Land Grants or the German Humboldtian tradition? or is it really something new stemming from the progressivism of America in the Roosevelt era or later in the 1920s?

ES: It's actually in between. I would peg the 1910s as the crucial decade when this mindset comes together, what I call technocratic progressivism, this burgeoning belief in rationalistic solutions to social

problems. The tenor really changes in the 1910s with the emergence of this kind of progressivism. You get a bunch of movements like city planning, eugenics, intelligence testing, they'll all come out of a mindset that gets really strong in that era. There's some other scholars who have written about this in the past more broadly, John Jordan's book on machine age ideology, but nobody who's really centered it in the university and looked at how that played out over time. So, I certainly think it grew in the 1920s and 30s. You mentioned Roosevelt, and so certainly Franklin Roosevelt brought a number of people into the federal government who were devotees of these kind of ideals. Charles Miriam is somebody I talk about in the beginning of the book. I call him the godfather of the instrumental university. And he really came out of this technocratic progressive mindset.

AU: You make the link early on in your book between the notion of instrumental universities and the evolution of a new organizational form within the university, what you call the organized research unit. The way you described them in the book sounds very much like what we today would call a center, but in their origin, they were much larger and more important than most of today's centers, right?

ES: They were typically called centers and institutes, although sometimes they went by bureau, or program, or another name. But this whole issue about the nomenclature really became very widespread as these entities proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s. I mentioned in the book that faculty spent so much time discussing these issues that they became a topic for joking and sarcasm. I found something in the archives at the University of Michigan, notes from a 1960s meeting, where one professor read what was called "an Explanatory Ode for How to Tell a Center from an Institute". So, they would be nested in various ways. There would be issues of "well, did centers go under institutes or did institutes go under centers?" It was just all over the place in that era. So they did exist before World War II on a small scale. I talk about some of the early bureaus of public administration, like the bureau of Urban Research at Princeton in the book but really, they get fired up after World War II, and that's for a variety of reasons. One is that organized research seems so successful during the war, that people want to translate it to all these other fields afterward. Another is the much greater availability of external funding. The government foundations and corporations all stepped up their funding of sponsored research after the war. So yeah, quite prominent in this post-World War II era.

AU: One thing that struck me about all the work done by these organized research units, on either side of World War II, is that most of the problems seem to be that they're trying to solve. So they're organizing around problems, which is what centers do today, but they seem to be largely working in the social sciences. So, industrial relations and organization, urban planning, those kinds of things. Why did the social sciences lead the way in being instrumental? Is there some kind of co-evolution? Did the derive of organized research units affect the development of the social sciences?

ES: The social sciences absolutely led the way, and a lot of it came from Charles Miriam, who I mentioned a minute ago. He was at the University of Chicago longtime chair of the political science department there. Really, he was really the first one to articulate the behavioral approach to the study of politics. He had famous students, Harold Laswell and Herbert Simon, who went on to do a lot of work in expanding these intellectual frameworks. This notion fueled some of these organized research units. For Miriam himself, it wasn't so much that he was starting organized research units as that he laid the intellectual groundwork through a new entity in the 1920s called the Social Science Research Council. The Social Science Research Council promoted coordinated research and problem-centered research. Miriam had announced this as early as 1920 in an address to the American Political Science Association

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but it gets ramped up with Rockefeller funding as the 1920s continued. The Social Science Research Council developed these problem-oriented committees in areas like industrial relations and public administration. So, this kind of infrastructure really started to feed into and really motivate individual social scientists on campuses to want to create units on their campuses.

AU: You tell stories about a lot public universities in this book, but you only devote a significant time to one private institution, which is UPenn. Was there a difference in the way that public and private universities approached this notion of instrumentality? Did publics have the advantage because they were children of a land grant tradition and thought of themselves more as instrumental to begin with? Or did private universities have an advantage because they were more developed, more modern and could offer better faculty to work in these units?

ES: Yeah, that's observant that there's a lot more space in the book devoted to public institutions. And really part of the reason for that is issues of archival records and access. In my original plan for the book, there were a couple more private institutions that were supposed to be highlighted. I won't name names, but there were issues with either accessing the archives or the quality and quantity of the archival materials just didn't allow me to write in a rich way about those institutions. Still I think there is something to the role of the land grant tradition at publics. I talk about the UC Irvine situation, the creation of that new campus and there, Clark Kerr was explicitly articulating that he wanted to revise the land grant tradition which had been very agriculture centric. He wanted to find a way to put the social sciences into an important strand of that land grant tradition. So that was definitely something there. Yet, at the same time, it wasn't always the case that Land Grant made a place more hospitable to instrumentality. For instance, at the University of Wisconsin, I talk about how that land grant institution became an inhospitable place for Richard Ely's very early ORU on land issues, and how he eventually decamped to a private university, Northwestern.

AU: Ethan, you don't talk a lot directly about the Second World War in the book, but obviously that's when American universities became very instrumental, part of the wartime state, the most obvious example being the University of Chicago's role in the Manhattan Project. How did World War II change the direction of instrumental universities?

ES: Well, the war was huge. It created the template for ORUs through the Office of Scientific Research and Development that Franklin Roosevelt set up under the leadership of Vannevar Bush. This was different than how the federal government had approached universities during World War I. During the first war, they brought scientists directly into government service, but during the second war, they came up with this idea of contracts and grants to have scientists be at their universities or go to other universities. One of the things that did was it gave a lot of people experience, university faculty came together around a problem from different disciplines. It really had a lot of impact on the leadership and who was perceived to be a good university leader after the war. So, I talked a lot in the book about Gaylord Harwell, who eventually became the president of Penn. He directed the Navy's Underwater Sound Lab down in San Diego during the war, and that gave him prominence and executive experience. I wrote an article a few years ago in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography about the search that brought Harwell to Penn's presidency and put that in the context of other university presidential searches going on at the time. It was striking how experience from a wartime lab or leading a wartime lab was a crucial thing that a lot of universities were looking for in a president after the war. So it wasn't just Harwell, it was Arthur Compton at Washington University. It was Eric Walker at Penn

The World of Education Podcast

Episode 1.8: Instrumentality

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State. It was Lee DuBridge at Caltech. And boy, he was the most sought after candidate all these universities who wanted to bring in Lee DuBridge. But even a humanist, Lawrence Kimpton, who had helped direct that lab, the metallurgist lab at the University of Chicago, he became a president.

AU: So, instrumentality became a good thing to have on your CV?

ES: Yes.

AU: I was especially interested in your chapter on the University of California Irvine, which as you note, was the first major university to be founded with a mission of being a) social science heavy and b) being instrumental. So, these things were supposed to be in its DNA. What happened? Why didn't it work out?

ES: Well, there were a number of factors, but to some extent it got caught up in Clark Kerr's precarious position as President after the free speech movement. So, the free speech movement happened in the fall of 1964, right as the plans for Irvine were being really hammered out, the campus was to open a year later. In the spring of 65, Kerr offered his resignation, which ultimately didn't happen, but he was in a very precarious position and he was just beset with all these difficulties coming out of the FSM, and he didn't really have a lot of bandwidth for paying attention to what was going on at Irvine. Then further things got even more difficult with the ascension of Ronald Reagan to the governor's chair in 1967, and the financial cutbacks that Reagan wanted to make. So, the sense I got from looking through the archival materials is that the state government never really provided the level of funding for some of these things, like the public policy research organization that had been anticipated, but there was also instability at UCI among the lead people there. So James March, who described himself as a missionary social scientist. He only stayed five years. He left for Stanford in 1970. Ivan Hinderaker who helped design things didn't even stay until the campus opened. He left to be Chancellor at UC Riverside. But there are a couple other things too. On a national level, the declining prestige of high modern social science connected with its failures in Vietnam. The whole style of thought that UC Irvine started to go into decline in the late sixties. Then there's the whole issue of the UC system and competition between campuses. Berkeley decided it wanted in so it started to create a graduate school of public policy and power brokers moved funds over there rather than down to Irvine.

AU: It's hard to argue against the flagship, isn't it? In your book, the organized research units are these big interdisciplinary centers attracting large amounts of funding, albeit perhaps temporary sometimes. They are able to hire their own staff, they're portrayed as being objects of envy on campus. These are the cool place to be. Nowadays, centers are often the poor cousins on campus. They're poorly funded and precariously organized while the disciplinary based academic departments rule the roost again. What happened? How did we get from the age you described to where we are now?

ES: We need to look at specific time periods. So, Roger Geiger has done a lot of good work on American research universities in the 20th century and he looks at this issue in the 1980s and 1990s and finds still a lot of strength in the ORUs. He reports that in the 1980s, the number of non-faculty researchers doubled, the number of ORUs grew 30% the first half of the decade. Then, in the 1990s he mentions Michigan establishing about 80 new research units and says more generally, that conditions in the 1990s encouraged ORUs. So, we only need even more scholarship on what's happened more recently than that. I will say that the foundation landscape changed. A lot of this stuff was supported by the Ford

The World of Education Podcast

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Foundation in the first couple decades after the war. And things changed there as time went on. Also organized research units are precarious because they are dependent on favorable political and cultural winds. So, when the winds change, external funders might be less interested in the topic that animated a particular ORU. You see that in a couple of the units I mentioned, the Center for Research on Economic Development at Michigan, the Public Policy Research Organization at Irvine. Both of those were kind of a product of this high modern/modernization theory moment coming out of the Kennedy administration and by the time we're in the mid 1970s, we're in a very different cultural situation. Universities are also dealing with financial shortfalls, having to do cutbacks during the 1970s. Even Princeton was slashing budget in the 1970s. Then the issue of leadership, a lot of these ORUs were formed around a charismatic leader so when those people moved on, it could cause trouble for the entity.

AU: Let me come back to the point we started with, about the general view of the instrumental university as a neoliberal corporate thing, rather than something rooted in progressivism. It occurs to me that after the close of this book in the early 1970s, there genuinely was a change in the way universities viewed the nature of instrumentality and their best roots to being seen as contributors to society and the economy. How much of this was about a change in the external economic environment? How much was it a change in the political environment? How much of it was just universities realizing that the way they'd been doing instrumentality to date just didn't play very well or as reliably or be funded as reliably as you just mentioned?

ES: Yeah, there definitely are changes. A bunch of them. I already mentioned a moment ago the economic environment of the 1970s and certainly state funding of their universities has been something that's declined considerably in the United States since the time period mentioned in my book. But, the growth of the economic development impetus, that's something that began during the period covered by my book, that really has continued and morphed. So I talk about this report that the state of Pennsylvania did in the 1960s talking about universities as generators of economic growth. That kind of language and framing of what universities are supposed to do has really continued and probably strengthened in a lot of ways. You see these universities trying to create innovation hubs. You've got the Pennovation Center at the University of Pennsylvania, which is a fairly recent development. But you also have different populations of people coming to universities. I think one of the things that hasn't been studied enough is the connection between the decline of the American industrial economy and college populations. Because if you look at the statistics, the percentage of high school grads going on to college really goes up in the 1980s and that's bringing a different kind of student to campus. The kinds of things those students are interested in studying as opposed to the kinds of student populations that were there before, I think that's an issue that I am really hoping scholars are going to get into.

AU: Interesting. Well, that's all we have time for today. Ethan, thanks so much for being with us.

ES: You're very welcome.

AU: It remains for me to thank the show's excellent producers, Tiffany MacLennan and Sam Pufek, and of course, you, the listener for tuning in. If you have any comments or suggestions for future episodes, please send us a line at podcast@highereducation.com. Please join us next week when our guest will be Dr. Juan Carlos Navarro, and we'll be discussing developments in higher education in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Bye for now.

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