



The University and Its Disciplines: Teaching and Learning Within and Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

Edited by Carolin Kreber, Routledge, Taylor, and Francis, New York (2009)

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What is the purpose of higher education? What roles do we each play within this purpose and how do we, within and through our disciplines, help students achieve this purpose? *The University and Its Disciplines*, edited by Carolin Kreber, comes at a time when higher education is being influenced by the effects of the current economic downturn throughout the country and across the world, compelling us to reexamine the purpose of higher education and the role that it plays in both our students' lives and in our global society. With its multiple perspectives on academic disciplines and higher education, this volume helps guide readers outside of their academic comfort zones to analyze the purpose of higher education, the best outcomes for graduates of our programs, and the possible ways of restructuring our own colleges, departments, programs, and courses with the goal of providing the best education for our students.

As an edited volume of multiple interrelated chapters resulting from a two-day international colloquium, *The University and Its Disciplines* creates an accessible discussion by including several contributors who approach the notion of disciplines from a variety of perspectives situating the acts of teaching, learning, and assessment within their definitions of disciplines and their notions of gradateness (the characteristics of graduates of higher education programs). Divided up into seven sections, the volume includes the perspectives of contributors who work in various areas of higher education such as professional development, assessment, and curriculum development. The main focus of the volume is on defining academic disciplines in relation to teaching, learning, and assessment, and how the related disciplinary activities contribute to the overall purpose of higher education, especially in respect to faculty and students.

Key chapters come from the original colloquium presentations and other authors contributed reactive chapters extending their own perspectives to those discussions. The first section addresses the role of disciplines within higher education through the avenue of graduate outcomes and how academic disciplines contribute to graduate outcomes. This discussion includes an overview of binaries through which we can examine and define disciplines (e.g. hard versus soft and applied versus pure) and ends with the notion of transdisciplinarity, which Kreber defines as going beyond or transcending the boundaries of specific disciplines. However, to develop qualities of transdisciplinarity in our institutions and student populations, we must define disciplines for ourselves.

The volume examines the structure of disciplines as well as the advantages and disadvantages of operating within binary definitions of disciplines and different types of disciplinary boundaries. Disciplines are explored as having their own cultures that affect teaching, learning, and assessment and then examines discipline-based "ways of thinking and practicing" (WTP) that faculty and departments extend to students through course-level and program-level engagement opportunities. From this notion of WTP, the volume progresses with a socio-cultural perspective whereby the purpose of higher education is to engage students in disciplinary communities that help them become members of those communities through the development of their own beliefs and identities. This process provides opportunities to become adept at engaging in transdisciplinary communities, which is a critical component for institutions that wish to graduate students who are not just members of their own disciplinary communities but also of other related fields as lifelong learners. At the same time, the text

examines the role of faculty in influencing their own disciplines and offers strategies for faculty members to become more transdisciplinary in their teaching and research.

One noteworthy aspect of the volume is the inclusion of the teaching, learning, and assessment triangle throughout the discussion on disciplines, accepting that these three aspects are interrelated and cannot be separated from each other or from the notion of disciplines. The explicit inclusion of teaching, learning, and assessment allows readers to examine disciplines from both the teaching and learning perspective in terms of how faculty help students become members of disciplinary communities and develop the qualities of gradueness as well as how students develop their own beliefs and identities about themselves within academic disciplines to inherit these qualities of gradueness. Situating teaching, learning, and assessment within the discussion of academic disciplines, which in turn contributes to the discussions on the purpose of higher education, provides a well-rounded perspective for administrators who might not be as involved in this discussions or experiences with faculty and students on a daily basis.

The chapter contributors, made up of US, UK, and Canadian scholars, approach the notion of disciplines from a variety of perspectives within various theoretical frameworks, and the editorial choice of having key and reactive chapters interconnect might seem repetitive, but in actuality, the techniques presents an interrelated discussion rather than a disjointed collection of essays. The interrelated approach engages readers with comfort and ease in the multilayered discussion of academic disciplines, making the text accessible to both novices and experts in the field of adult and higher education including faculty, administrators, and graduate students. From this position, the volume could be used by teaching academies as a resource for faculty and administrators seeking to reflect on their institutions and best practices, and graduate students in adult and higher education programs who are preparing to be leaders within the complex web of the field of higher education.