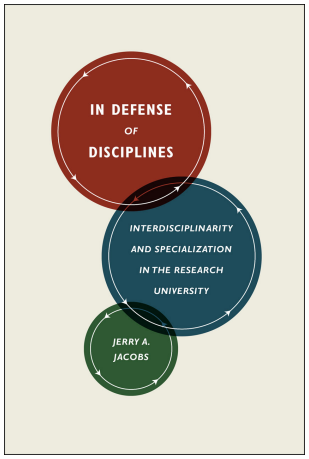

In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University

Jacobs, Jerry A.
University of Chicago Press Chicago Distribution Center, 2014

Book Review

Tags: academic disciplines | integrative education | interdisciplinarity

Reviewed by: Joanne Maguire Robinson, *University of North Carolina - Charlotte*
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What is the use of academic disciplines? Answers to that question have encouraged the growth of interdisciplinary programs on many campuses, either by simply encouraging conversation among people in different fields or by at least partially dismantling the system of disciplines. This book employs data and case studies to challenge the enthusiasm for this potentially disastrous revolution. Jacobs argues that interdisciplinarity already exists everywhere in higher education (123) and that efforts to push for more will not pay dividends worth the effort. He warns administrators and faculty away from seeing interdisciplinarity as an end to itself or a way to significantly change rates of scholarly cross-fertilization. In short, this book is a call to nurture and appreciate what already exists.

The focus is largely on the research agenda of larger universities, but Jacobs dedicates a chapter to considering “integrative education” for undergraduates, noting that “The question of how the education of undergraduates should be organized is just as large and just as complex as the issues pertaining to research” (188). An integrative education is distinguished from an interdisciplinary education by its approach rather than the number of its disciplinary parts. Jacobs notes that interdisciplinary programs such as African American studies and women’s studies, often founded because of faculty interest, generally have low student enrollment, in part because students can find integrated learning in cross-listed classes and double majors. Jacobs sees efforts toward creating systems to promote interdisciplinary majors as folly. Based on the evidence, “we cannot say that interdisciplinary education represents a discernible improvement over the traditional disciplinary fields” (208).

According to Jacobs, the biggest challenge to undergraduate liberal arts programs are the

more vocational, applied majors, such as communications and business, fields that do not encourage critical thinking or the kind of breadth needed for true integration of knowledge. To Jacobs, rapid changes in our world require that students learn less tangible skills, such as making connections and seeing things from multiple perspectives. The applied fields have become increasingly myopic: he notes that liberal arts disciplines are far less likely to splinter into subspecialties than applied fields that split due to job market pressures (Table 9.2 identifies twelve specialties within the combined fields of philosophy and religious studies). Jacobs writes, "As we have seen, reformers typically define the term 'integrated' as synonymous with broad, but, ironically, education that is holistic, integrated, effectively combining theoretical and applied dimensions, experiential, and classroom-based knowledge, is more likely the more highly circumscribed the topic and setting" (197). Too much specialization, he argues, blunts this effect.

The conclusion here is that "the liberal arts are not the problem but rather the best hope for a broad and demanding education in a world that increasingly depends on educated citizens and open-minded professionals" (189). This book is recommended to anyone interested in the rise (and decline?) of interdisciplinarity on college campuses and debates over the value of the liberal arts.

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