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**ADMINISTERING
INTERDISCIPLINARY
AND INNOVATIVE
PROGRAMS:
Lessons from the Rise and Fall of
Arizona International College**

by

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In “Disciplinary Hegemony Meets Interdisciplinary Ascendancy: Can Interdisciplinary/Integrative Studies Survive, and, If So, How?” Stuart Henry (2005) contextualizes his arguments by noting recent closures and reorganizations of interdisciplinary programs within larger, more traditional disciplinary units. As his title suggests, these closures and reorganizations are occurring during a period in which enrollments and growth in some interdisciplinary undergraduate programs like those at Arizona State University and Wayne State University are exceeding those of more traditional units. The concept of disciplinary hegemony is useful for academic leaders developing strategies to shepherd interdisciplinary and innovative programs embedded within institutions where more traditional disciplinary structures and pedagogies are dominant. Gramsci’s (1981) concept of hegemony explains how power relationships work through articulations of the economic and the cultural, between the structural and symbolic. While academic leadership strategies must be informed by immediate institutional context, struggles to develop and sustain interdisciplinary, integrative, and

other innovative programs are always played out on this dual terrain.¹ What lessons can be learned from the rise and fall of the innovative Arizona International College (AIC) within the Research 1 University of Arizona (UA)? By exploring this specific case, I hope to suggest a general approach of strategic engagement and translation on this dual terrain of the structural and the cultural for administrative and faculty leadership of similarly embedded programs. Such leaders must work to connect, articulate, and balance the distinct cultures of traditional and innovative units—epistemologies, educational philosophies, convictions about faculty work roles and relationships—along with the changing economic imperatives and structural realities of these units—budget processes, cost structures, enrollment expectations, faculty/student ratios, workloads, faculty lines, promotion and tenure, development opportunities, student demographic and societal changes—all within the mission and finances of the institution as a whole.

Early in 1990, the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) began planning for enrollment increases expected in the state public university system into the 21st century. Given demographic projections that student enrollments would soon exceed capacity, the ABOR launched an initiative to develop a new public liberal arts college dedicated to practical, interdisciplinary learning. A Community Advisory Group planned campus and community connections. A National Advisory Group brought together leaders in innovative undergraduate education to combine “best practices” in liberal learning to create an interdisciplinary curriculum designed to meet the educational needs of an increasingly globalized society. The ABOR approved the curriculum plan, named the new school Arizona International University (AIU), and established it under the UA accreditation umbrella. The ABOR intended that AIU would soon emerge as a fully independent public institution of higher education in the state system. Thus, the emergent AIU was in uncertain institutional space: not a branch campus, not a college, but an emergent independent university temporarily housed within the UA system of colleges. The curriculum and hiring practices were developed and approved outside of regular UA faculty governance process or policy. Critically, the ABOR decreed that AIU would hire faculty on long-term contracts rather than tenure.

In order to avoid the problems associated with disciplinary departmentalization in curricular and organizational development *within* AIU, Scott and Fernandez (2001) explain how faculty were instead grouped into themed interdisciplinary “houses” with roles, responsibilities, and rewards tied to student learning environments and outcomes. Hierarchy was kept

fairly flat through the use of task-oriented interdisciplinary teams composed of student, staff, and faculty. Scott and Fernandez (2001) do call attention to the internal challenges (i.e., the “wild ride”) of developing interdisciplinary curricula and innovative structure and relations with recently hired faculty who had been trained and employed in more traditional institutions. However, in my own experiences there after the personnel conflicts settled down, these internal approaches seemed successful in creating a very different working and learning culture within AIU that valued and sustained interdisciplinary learning and faculty collaboration. In any event the design teams successfully created innovative curricular and delivery models that embodied Boyer’s (1990) reconceptualization of faculty work and manifest the Boyer Commission’s (1998) recommendations for reinventing undergraduate education in research universities.

AIU’s mission and vision highlighted the development of multicultural and global perspectives, ethical community-engagement, interdisciplinary knowledge, and practical abilities—all designed to increase community well-being and environmental sustainability. A multi-year, core curricula brought students and faculty together in problem-based interdisciplinary learning communities. Student learning outcomes were not only developed in all courses, but also through service-learning, career-internship, and community-based research projects, and these were assessed through multi-year portfolios. A junior core course in interdisciplinary research methods prepared students to propose and execute their senior capstone research projects as the culmination of their individually-designed upper-division courses of study. Rather than a traditional promotion and tenure system, an innovative formative and summative evaluation process was developed with support of a FIPSE grant; AIU faculty had multi-year, renewable contracts with innovative roles and responsibilities that tied evaluation of faculty scholarship, teaching, service, and development to the improvement our community-based learning environments. However, these organizational and curricular approaches to structuring faculty, staff, and student collaboration and learning were primarily focused *within* AIU and did not address problematic relationships with the more powerful UA departments. Significant efforts had been made early on by UA and AIU administration to include several faculty leaders from UA departments and the UA Faculty Senate on AIU Planning, Curriculum and Recruitment Committees. However, the process of the development of AIU occurred almost entirely outside of UA governance processes by ABOR fiat and legislative funding and sped at such a pace—two years from initial funding in 1994

to opening in 1996—that there was insufficient opportunity for ownership and understanding of AIU by most faculty in UA departments. Rather than understanding the ways in which AIC might complement the mission of the UA in a safe and efficient manner by easing certain enrollment pressures in oversubscribed UA programs, by serving as a laboratory and catalyst for undergraduate learning and community outreach, etc., AIC was perceived, for example, to be an effort to undo tenure in the state system generally, to offer an “unapproved” curricula lacking in (disciplinary) rigor, and to undermine UA faculty governance and the (disciplinary) legitimacy of other UA programs. Not surprisingly the UA Faculty Senate refused to approve the AIU curricular plan and approved motions demanding that AIU follow UA curricular processes. Rather than understanding AIU cost structures and personnel policy as an efficient and effective supplement to UA’s expensive, research-oriented focus to serving state needs, the UA Faculty Senate voted to require AIU to follow UA hiring and personnel processes and policy (UA Faculty Senate, 1996).

The challenges associated with developing an innovative unit outside of a more traditional institution to which the innovation is then appended are relatively common. Looking back at the closure of numerous innovative programs started during the economic and educational boom between World War II and the late 1960s, Hahn (1984) traces the development of “add-on” interdisciplinary and extra-departmental programs and innovative campuses outside of traditional departmental structures at the same time that soaring governmental funding for research was increasing the hegemony of traditional departments. Typically, these “add-on” units were not considered threatening to traditional departments during the heights of institutional enrollment growth and prosperity. Developed outside of traditional departments’ governance structures and without institution-wide structural reforms in curriculum or organization, the “add-on approach” tends to leave the new programs without the institutional power to effect larger change in the institution. Hahn argues that in times of scarcity and demographic change—for example, during the college-wide cutbacks of the late 1970s—such programs find it difficult to survive (pp. 19-21). In their explanation of the development and organizational effects of disciplinary departments, Amey and Brown (2004) highlight additional structural barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration created by the dominance of disciplinary departments: departmental structure, faculty reward structures, budgetary procedures, and lack of organizational neutral space (p. 65). Amey and Brown also cite Tierney’s (1989, 1999) argument that the reorganizations

and decentralization of higher education institutions in the 1980s and 1990s simultaneously increased budgetary and academic decision-making authority at the departmental level and resulted in the establishment of departmental cultures with values and norms at times quite distinct from those of the larger institution (pp. 65-66). So in addition to organizational and economic barriers, efforts to improve communication and collaboration across distinct traditional and innovative units are often further complicated by cultural difference.

By many measures, AIU was a success: a growing, talented, and diverse student body; superior retention and graduation rates, especially of minority and first generation students; an engaged, energetic, and excellent faculty; community and business support and student placement in internships and jobs; an impressive record of grants and development, including leading the development of the highly successful FIPSE-funded Consortium of Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL: www.cielearn.org). However, AIU leadership had to negotiate many conflicts and challenges at both the structural and discursive levels. The Community Advisory Group had recommended that AIU be sited in or near the historic Tucson city center. This made sense from a variety of viewpoints: community-based education is easier to accomplish near communities and community organizations; students would have better living, learning, and social resources including city and UA libraries; the struggling city center would benefit from the addition of a college. Instead, because the UA planned to develop a new research park, AIU was initially sited in—and paid rent to occupy—the old IBM plant located, beyond most housing and all public transport, on the far eastern outskirts of Tucson. The challenges of this compromise “campus”—very long commutes, geographic isolation, overtly corporate landscape—coupled with the negative publicity associated with UA Faculty Senate actions and internal personnel conflicts resulted in initial enrollments that did not meet expectations in 1996-1997. Nevertheless, AIC continued to develop curriculum, build enrollments, and establish an independent accreditation track. In 1998, with enrollments still below expectations and with continuing PR problems, AIC was relocated by the new UA President Peter Likens to temporary, but much better quarters just north of the UA main campus. At this time, AIU was renamed Arizona International College (AIC)—a college led by a dean within the UA system—and gave up its separate accreditation track. Between 1999 and 2001, AIC new student enrollments grew quickly; staff and faculty assisted in the design of the proposed UA North campus shared with Pima Community College (PCC).

AIC began planning to move to UA North, the next temporary home on AIC's journey to supposed independence.

Throughout this process, most faculty at the UA main campus continued to view AIC with suspicion, some with outright fear and contempt. One issue was that the development of student competencies through a core curriculum of problem-based interdisciplinary learning communities was viewed as lacking disciplinary foundations, rigor and legitimacy. As this and other arguments played out in faculty meetings and the local press with varying degrees of suspicion and hostility, AIC's trajectory toward independence—which by definition required a large degree of separation from the UA main campus—became a sort of competitive isolation from UA main campus faculty and programs. This resulted in a process of mutual othering. The main campus increasingly viewed AIC programs and faculty as illegitimate, with or without direct knowledge of the quality of AIC programs. At the same time, the AIC faculty tended increasingly to view their special approach to student learning as wholly superior and unique. Of course, AIC's learning environments were distinct and highly effective, particularly for a range of diverse learners, and I would argue that such innovative units need to develop and sustain distinct work cultures. But I believe that as these mutual antagonisms continued to spiral, the difference of our learning environments became exaggerated beyond any productive deployment of “strategic essentialism” as described by Augsburg. On a more structural level, while AIC new student enrollments were growing, they were not growing fast enough to protect against allegations of being an expensive, failed experiment in the “market”—particularly as resources available to higher education grew scarcer with the millennial economic downturn. Faced with a massive crisis in state higher education budgets, and repeated mid-year rescissions, in October 2001 UA President Likens decided to disestablish AIC to protect more traditional units and as a precursor to his multi-year process of “focused excellence” (see Readings 1996). Although students, staff, and faculty came together with community leaders to protest what we argued was a waste of taxpayer investment—why not sell AIC in the spirit of technology transfer to recoup the investment and serve the state's students?—the President's decision was quickly approved by the ABOR. AIC was forbidden to accept new students and finally closed its doors after the last student graduated in 2005.

While the larger political economic situation and the decision to close the innovative college resonated with much of what Henry (2005) describes, I will focus my hindsight reflections to explore how strategic engagement

and translation both internally and toward the UA main campus might have improved AIC's odds for success. I believe that it is often possible to reframe structural and cultural connections between innovative and more traditional units such that the discursive terrain makes such closures inconceivable. Kliewer's (1999) study of innovation in higher education lists the factors found to enhance the survival of innovative institutions and programs: (a) partnerships or collaborative teaching and learning networks with traditional campuses or membership in a consortium or other group of “traditional” institutions; (b) learning lessons from other innovative programs; (c) ability to adapt and change; (d) community support (pp. 217-222). AIC benefited greatly from membership in the highly successful Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL) as well as from looser affiliations such as the Association for Integrative Studies. The National Advisory Group and other CIEL schools provided ample opportunity for learning from other innovative programs. In his systematic study of innovation at sub-colleges in the New York system, Levine (1980) argues that the concepts of compatibility and profitability have the most explanatory power for why innovative units flourish or die within host institutions. Kliewer summarizes compatibility as the “degree of congruence—the fit—between the norms, values, and goals of the host institution and the innovation” while profitability refers “to the extent to which the innovation satisfies the needs of the campus and its constituencies” (p. xxii). When both compatibility and profitability are present, the innovation is successful. When either is lacking, the innovation tends to be terminated. Of course, perceptions of compatibility and profitability are discursive—they are constructed through communication and community interaction; these perceptions can be intentionally framed, re-framed, and transformed. It is the responsibility of academic leadership in innovative programs to articulate the compatibility and the profitability of the innovative program both internally to the constituents of the innovative program and externally to the faculty, staff, and administration of the larger host institution. Strategic engagement and translation must operate at the cultural or symbolic level and the economic or structural level both internally and externally in order for the innovation to be owned as compatible and profitable within the larger institution.

There were key structural reasons why AIC was vulnerable. Most importantly, our faculty did not have tenure and the UA could thus realize significant savings by eliminating AIC. While such structural vulnerabilities are often part of the price of creating innovative programs, they do not necessarily result in closure or reorganization. Indeed, I would argue that

in some situations, such a structural challenge should be articulated as an opportunity for the innovative unit. I recall a 2005 conversation among the faculty representatives of the UA's Undergraduate Council. They were addressing the unfortunate effects for students when individual departments—managed as “disciplinary silos” and competing for decreasing resources to serve increasing enrollments—began a cascading process of increased admissions barriers for students selecting majors (e.g., increased grade point average, application portfolios, interviews, etc.). Whether the students left closed out of disciplinary majors? Interdisciplinary programs, they mused. They asked me whether I thought the model would work in the UA to solve this problem of access for students and also, perhaps, the increasingly dynamic demand for the flexible production of knowledge, of student degree areas, of full-time tuition equivalents (FTTEs). They asked me whether there were sufficient qualified faculty willing to teach in such interdisciplinary programs for multi-year contracts as necessary given changing institutional constraints and student demand for study areas? Despite the irony that they were describing the design of the recently disestablished AIC that had previously seemed such a threat to the UA systems of tenure, I had to answer, “yes.” What would have happened for AIC had such connections been articulated from the beginning? An honest and strategic description of some of the functions of the economic and curricular structure of AIC might have resonated with the institutional needs shared by the UA main campus faculty. Similarly, about a year before AIC's final closure in 2005, a key UA central administrator told me that they had just read a recent AAC&U report on best practices in undergraduate education and that AIC seemed to have been built right around the practices that the UA should be exploring for future implementation. Perhaps, the UA would eventually regret closing down AIC? Perhaps, but probably not in any widespread way. I would argue that the main campus was insufficiently aware of the types of innovative projects and pedagogical approaches in which AIC was positioned to provide leadership: education for sustainability, project-based learning, community-based research, serving Hispanic and other diverse students, learning communities, etc. Such leadership might have been particularly compatible with the goals set by President Likens that the UA was to be a “student-centered research institution” and would become both more selective and a Hispanic-serving institution. AIC's “illegitimate” interdisciplinary structure and non-tenure multi-year contracts might have been strategically translated as meeting the institutional needs and values of the UA main campus, as both profitable and compatible.

Interdisciplinary administrators should invest time and resources in reconfiguring the discursive terrain of the institution through engagement and translation not only upwards to central administration and outwards to the rest of the institution, but also internally to the faculty within the interdisciplinary unit. This is particularly important in cases of structural crisis or discursive mission mismatch—real or perceived—between, for example, “disciplinary” and “interdisciplinary” units, or tenured “Research I” faculty and non-tenured liberal arts or integrative studies faculty. If critical integrative programs are to survive within other institutions, they must be economically profitable as well as culturally compatible. While honest articulations of the economic function of innovative programs may highlight their profitability to the rest of the institution, some dissonance may result within the innovative unit when non-tenure faculty see their work as similar in importance, in rigor and legitimacy, but different in terms of compensation or job security. This too can be an opportunity for organizational change.

As Augsburg points out, interdisciplinary programs are not monolithic. A significant minority of AIC faculty might well have fit better within disciplinary departments of the research university. Indeed, because of the relative paucity of explicitly interdisciplinary doctoral training programs, most interdisciplinary studies programs are staffed by “reformed” disciplinarians. Here, I would agree with Szostak that framing different programs as “specialized” and “integrative” might be a more effective approach than the typical “disciplinary” and “interdisciplinary.” To further blur the boundaries, as in most institutions, many UA main campus “disciplinary” departments house faculty with so diverse a range of theoretical, methodological, and substantive interests to blur even the specializing/integrative frames. The reality is that critical interdisciplinarity and practical integration are relatively widespread in academia, even though they are not the central institutional organizing and pedagogical priorities that they were at AIC. Scattered widely throughout the UA main campus are educators both well-versed in, and committed to, the best practices in student-centered learning. Strategic engagement requires creating institutional spaces and rewards to encourage networking and collaborations between faculty and staff with such orientations across the traditional and innovative units. Such engagement can increase community understanding of and support for the innovative unit across the institution. Further, such social networks and collaborations build collegiality and camaraderie—useful groundwork for the necessary initiatives toward equity across faculty work roles as colleagues come to understand both the real similarities and differences between their labor.

After the innovative unit is recognized as profitable and compatible within the larger institutions, such initiatives for equity should be pursued deliberately. Unfortunately, in the case of AIC such strategic engagement had not sufficiently transformed the discursive terrain.

AIC's original business plan had faculty working 12-month contracts with heavy teaching loads and incredible program development responsibilities. It was a relatively efficient and productive model for interdisciplinary, student-centered learning in a low-tuition, public liberal arts college with small classes and wonderful levels of faculty-student interaction. Gradually, the AIC administration and faculty worked together to decrease the teaching load and move to a 10-month contract. This collaboration was as it should be: It made faculty workloads more reasonable and maintained a model that still could have been framed as flexible and efficient. Augsburg is right to direct attention to what paths faculty *think* their units should follow. Faculty self-governance *is* essential. However, at the same time as a move toward reduced workloads or toward tenured faculty lines housed wholly or partially within the unit may increase program stability, the timing and framing of the argument for such cost increases must be carefully considered. In 2001, on the poorly prepared discursive terrain described above, the AIC community was making strong arguments to central administration that it must be allowed to proceed with both its international search for a new dean and a nearly 50 percent increase in its full-time faculty. The war of position had already been lost as the expressions of the real needs for strategic investments were easily dismissed as optional additional expenses and may have called attention to other possible cost cuts.

As for the question of labor equity at AIC, I believe that the faculty evaluation, reward, and multi-year contract system served AIC faculty well. It provided incentives for focusing on student learning, recognition and rewards for scholarship and service to community, and a real expectation of continuance—of job stability—disestablishment notwithstanding. The boundaries between tenure and non-tenure track faculty positions continue to blur with the increasing strength of post-tenure review. I strongly believe that it is both the ethical and strategic path of servant leadership to administer by maximizing real participatory decision-making and consensus; however, decision-makers should be aware of the potentially divisive effects of external perceptions of changed workload or faculty status. The issue here should not be framed as non-tenure versus post-tenure review. Quite the contrary, such conflicts and divisions between labor groups come from a failure to articulate a pro-labor position that recognizes the real structural

connections between the groups. This is reminiscent of the conflicts between U.S. wage-workers seeing undocumented workers as their enemy, instead of their structural allies. Such misunderstandings and conflicts led to a situation in which AIC was shut down—because the discursive terrain was such that it could be. There was insufficient main campus faculty support to rally to the program's defense. Indeed, many main campus employees and community members bought into President Likens' lament that AIC had been a noble but failed experiment. But the point is not only that strategic engagement and translation should have been employed in order to increase the number of allies willing to defend the program when it was under attack. Rather, I believe that the unfortunate but "common-sense" solution of closing AIC as a "noble but failed experiment" might never have been imaginable. Inadvertently, the UA discursive terrain had been allowed to develop such that this argument seemed perhaps sad, but quite naturally true.

To be meaningful, such articulation should proceed both internally and externally. Within the interdisciplinary unit, leadership should make clear the real (if unstated) mission and structural imperatives of the larger institution as a context within which interdisciplinary faculty develop complementary, yet critical and distinct programs, as well as an ability to convincingly demonstrate the success of these programs. Systematic and ongoing assessment for learning requires faculty buy-in but enables external articulation with a variety of important constituencies. At AIC we did good work with assessment, but few folks at the main campus were aware of—or involved in—the "excellence" of our processes or our proven successes. I am not only talking about proactive external public relations, although integrated and intentional communications of student, faculty, and administrative successes are essential. But rather, I suggest, that what is needed is a strategic engagement, beginning with the other staff, faculty, and administrative leaders interested in engaged, innovative scholarship, and student learning. In order to best protect an institutional space for difference, I recommend a gradual, always partial, discursive integration of both the internal and external groups in a way that lays the groundwork for a common-sense conceptualization of a shared project, a shared institution, even if manifest in radically different ways. Not only does such an approach provide plenty of room for diverse innovative work beneath the articulation, but it can also position the integrative unit in a leadership role vis-à-vis hegemonic relations and ideology within the larger institution. Unfortunately, given the increasing costs and decreasing state funding for higher education, protecting such spaces often requires interdisciplinary

leadership to balance internal and external discursive approaches with more costly strategic structural integration.

I would like to close with a discussion of one last challenge that AIC leadership might have used as an opportunity for strategic engagement and translation. There were large numbers of students from both Pima Community College (PCC) and from the University of Arizona who might have been well-served by AIC for their upper-division programs of study. While AIC had an articulation agreement and planned to soon share a campus with PCC, the AIC lower-division core curriculum was essential to preparing students to design and succeed in their individually-tailored, upper-division concentrations. The AIC model was just not designed with transfer students in mind. I think that a process of internal and external strategic engagement and translation might have turned this into a real opportunity for increasing perceptions of profitability across the UA, PCC and regional communities. AIC faculty might have been asked to create an upper-division core curricula track with fewer requirements that served transfer students. AIC administration might have controlled the numbers of these students to reasonable levels and convincingly claimed AIC's real importance given the needs of the community college and larger university system. Again, I would frame this integration so that best innovative practices from the AIC would begin to lead the UA and PCC education practices (e.g., development of specific, aligned competencies; learning communities; themed and project-based learning; integrated student research projects throughout the curriculum). I am convinced that such approaches can be imagined and implemented to help develop and sustain lasting organizational change in other challenging institutional contexts. Faculty and administrators can use strategic engagement and translation to creatively articulate innovative and effective faculty practice as a complementary if not leading discourse in more traditional institutions as well as the communities that surround them. Such leadership is increasingly urgent in the current U.S. political economic and cultural climate where state and national budgets increase spending on prison systems, border militarization and war, while imposing normative accountability measures and slashing funding for innovative educational initiatives that might help create a more just and sustainable society.

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Notes

¹ In my discussion of the challenges of developing and sustaining organizational change at Arizona International College, I include "interdisciplinary" programs such as those categorized usefully by Klein (1990, chapter 10), but following Kliever (1999), I will also include "innovative" programs characterized not only by an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning, but also by student-centered pedagogy, participatory governance, experiential learning, and a focus on teaching as well as research in faculty work. Such embedded programs are well described in the literature on innovation in higher education, and they range in type and context from interdisciplinary programs located within a college or school dominated by disciplinary departments, to "inner colleges" within a university or other system, to cluster colleges, to innovative, largely independent colleges located within federations or consortia of colleges (see Cardozier, 1993; Jones & Smith, 1984; Gaff, 1970; Grant & Riesman, 1978; Levine, 1980; Kliever, 1999; Newell & Reynolds, 1993; Smith & McCann, 2001; Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992).

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