COLLEGE MADE WHOLE

Integrative Learning for a Divided World

CHRIS W. GALLAGHER

Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore
2019
INTRODUCTION

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IS INTEGRATION

The ravages of climate change. Nuclear proliferation. Network-based terrorism, both physical and cyber. Political disenfranchisement, disenchchantment, and discord. Growing social and economic inequality. Threats to the pillars of democracy, including the separation of powers and freedom of the press. The emboldening of white supremacy and authoritarian populism. The impending automation of nearly half of the US workforce.¹

Even as these challenges become more acute, calls grow louder for dismantling US higher education—our best, and perhaps only, hope of effectively addressing them. Public funding has been slashed and diverted from accredited colleges and universities to non-institutional, for-profit providers. Federal regulations are being cut and safeguards removed for students defrauded by shady operators. Robust academic curricula are being jettisoned in favor of online training modules in workplace skills. Professional faculty are being replaced by educational technologies and armies of semiprofessional part-timers. Degrees are being deemphasized in favor of “stackable” credentials. Dubbed “the great unbundling of higher education” (Craig 2015), these developments spell the literal dis-integration of higher education as we have known it.²

And not a moment too soon, judging by the eschatological titles of recent books on higher education: The Fall of the Faculty, The Last Professors, The Toxic University, The Lost Soul of Higher Education, Zombies in the Academy, The End of College, College Disrupted, College Unbound, Fail U.³ These books are written from different perspectives, some by
non-academics promoting a brave new world of “game-changing” reforms and others by academics bemoaning the corporatization of the university. But they are united in their conviction that the end times have arrived for higher education.

Yet this is far from the first time we have heard such pronouncements, and I doubt it will be the last. The 1990s brought The University in Ruins, The Moral Collapse of the University, Impostors in the Temple, and Killing the Spirit. Clark Kerr (2001) reminds us that predictions of postsecondary doom were common even earlier. The 1960s and 1970s saw Academia in Anarchy, Chaos in Our Colleges, The Death of the American University, The Exploding University, and The Fall of the American University (and that’s just the beginning of the alphabet). In fact, as I show in chapter 1, critiques like these go back more than a hundred years. Rumors of the death of this resilient and adaptive social institution have proven, again and again, to be highly exaggerated.

Wait—adaptive? Granted, this is not a word often associated with higher education, but in fact, the institution has constantly evolved over time in good ways and bad, and it must continue to do so. For instance, it has increasingly become a mechanism for reproducing and even expanding social and economic inequality, rather than the engine of social mobility many imagine it to be. Now, as inequality threatens the very foundations of our republic, fraying civic bonds and undermining political institutions, higher education must adapt in ways that interrupt and reverse this pattern.

Unbundling higher education—breaking institutions into multiple distinct providers of goods and services; courses and curricula into discrete modules; faculty into various instructional roles (content developers, instructional designers, success coaches, evaluators); learning into atomized skills and bits of knowledge; and degrees into smaller (micro, nano) credentials—is exactly the wrong solution to this problem. It will exacerbate stratification and inequality, leaving individuals who lack cultural and economic capital vulnerable to predatory practices in a deregulated market and undermining our collective capacity to confront the social, cultural, and economic challenges that beset us. Mixing and matching assorted credentials from random providers is hardly a recipe for producing the kind of integrative thinkers who can effectively address complex and dynamic challenges.

Today’s rapidly changing social, political, and economic landscape demands thinkers who are comfortable working in the face of constant novelty and uncertainty—and who can slowly, patiently build a systems-based understanding of how the challenges developed and why. Thinkers who can develop new ideas, make new things, go off on wild flights of imagination—and who can produce sober analyses and considered judgments. Thinkers with specialized expertise about particular facets of the challenges—and with a general understanding of how larger forces and systems shape those challenges. Thinkers with a grasp of the affordances and limitations of technologies that can be brought to bear on the challenges—and an appreciation of how humans perceive, contribute to, and (one hopes!) ameliorate those challenges.

In truth, higher education as we have known it is not well designed to promote integrative learning and thinking either. But that’s not because colleges and universities are too bundled—indeed, they’re hardly bundled at all. Divisions between disciplines and between faculty produce courses and programs unrelated to each other, leaving students with lists of often incoherent major and general education requirements that they dutifully tick off. Divisions between campuses and communities produce the bogus conception that what happens at school is at worst divorced from and at best a simulated dry run for the “real world.” Divisions between faculty undermine their pedagogical power and professional standing. Divisions between undergraduate colleges and continuing education or extension schools unhelpfully segregate “traditional” undergraduates seeking degrees and “nontraditional” adults pursuing lifelong learning opportunities. Higher education is only loosely bundled, and that’s a problem.

It’s tempting to respond to all this, as some have, with a call to “rebundle” higher education (Bass and Eynon 2016; Horn 2014; Jansson 2010; Large 2013). But from my perspective, this isn’t quite right. That re- appears to call for a move backward, a return to some previous moment when colleges and universities were appropriately bundled. It’s true that unbundling has unfolded over time, but this does not mean
that there was a golden era when colleges and universities were bundled just right. In fact, the metaphor of the bundle is itself unhelpful and has made higher education an easy target for champions of disintegration. A bundle is a collection of things tied or wrapped together. It doesn’t add up to anything in particular or have a special function: a bundle of sticks is just a bunch of sticks.

Let’s say a science department or college is interested—as many are these days—in unbundling their three-credit courses, creating instead a suite of one-credit offerings. The thinking is that the smaller courses will increase student flexibility and drive enrollments. The department chooses its most popular courses: on dinosaurs, asteroids, and volcanoes. If students take all three, the logic goes, they will have the equivalent of a traditional three-credit course. Arithmetic aside, will they? Are students getting the depth and intensity of learning from this bundle that they would in a three-credit course? Or are they getting the intellectual equivalent of bite-size snacks—tasty but neither filling nor nutritious? Bundling itself does not ensure meaningful learning, and it may even undermine it.

On the other hand, let’s say the science department designs these one-credit courses as a connected set under the banner “adventures in scientific inquiry.” The courses are still organized around dinosaurs, asteroids, and volcanoes, but now they are designed to help students learn how paleontologists, astronomers, and volcanologists do their work—perhaps how they go about answering the question “What really happened to the dinosaurs?” In this formulation, students have the opportunity and tools to integrate knowledge and skills across their learning experiences. Pretty filling, pretty nutritious: an integrative learning experience that is more than the sum of its parts.

Many institutions are experimenting with short-form courses, including pop-ups, as well as various forms of modularity, in which independent units, typically short in duration, are either embedded in larger experiences or offered as separate credit- or non-credit-bearing experiences. These initiatives are typically pursued under the goals of flexibility and customization. Those are fine goals, but institutions need to ask: Do these initiatives promote integrative learning or dis-integrative learning? They could provide opportunities for students to combine and synthesize learning experiences in ways that make sense for their learning journeys. Or they could lead to a menu of unrelated bits of content that students mix and match as they would from any provider.

Building a better bundle sounds like a laudable goal, but it still leaves us with simply a collection of things. Indeed, colleges and universities do often look and act as loose assemblages of assorted things, some of which bear no discernible relation to teaching, learning, or advancing knowledge. The unbundlers are right about that much. But the answer to this problem is not to turn to what is essentially a marketing strategy in which goods or services are tied together so consumers will buy more than they might otherwise from a single company.

In order to help shape the kind of integrative learning and learners that can confront the complex challenges of the twenty-first century, colleges and universities will need to be neither unbundled nor re-bundled, but rather integrated. To integrate is to combine two or more things so that they become a new whole. The word’s etymology traces to the Latin integratus, the past participle of integrare, to make whole. Integration is a creative process of bringing something new into the world, something that—unlike a bundle—is more than the sum of its parts.

As someone who has spent his entire adult life teaching and holding administrative positions in colleges and universities, I can tell you that integrating these institutions so that they function as cohesive and coherent wholes will be neither simple nor easy. Integrating the people, practices, and processes of these institutions runs up against the time-honored tradition that the great historian of American higher education Laurence Veysey (1970) called “patterned isolation.” Well-established and heavily guarded borders and boundaries will need to be traversed. Both the structures and the cultures of most institutions will need to change.

But this can be done, as the examples throughout this book demonstrate. These examples are drawn both from my firsthand experience and from my research into a variety of institutions across the country. Perhaps no college or university is perfectly integrated, but the innovative and hard work of institutional integration in the service of integra-
tive learning is well under way. I hope this book makes that work visible and inspires others to join it.

Unbundling as Dis-integration

I use “unbundling” to name the current movement to dis-integrate higher education. I call proponents of unbundling “unbundlers.” This is not, admittedly, a unified group: “edupreneurs,” policy wonks, politicians, education journalists, and higher education leaders have differing perspectives and motivations. But they share an investment (often financial) in breaking down aspects of higher education into their constituent parts in the name of “efficiency.” Throughout this book, my main interlocutors are Kevin Carey (2015), the author of The End of College and director of the Education Policy Program at the technology-oriented think tank New America, and Ryan Craig (2015), the founding managing director of the private equity fund University Ventures and author of College Disrupted: The Great Unbundling of Higher Education. Published in the same year, these two books have garnered a great deal of attention and together lay out the case for unbundling higher education.

That case rests on a relentless critique of “traditional,” “incumbent,” or “hybrid” postsecondary institutions as maintaining a bloated, self-satisfied, inefficient, archaic monopoly on higher education. Unbundlers depict colleges and universities as “country clubs” (Carey 2015, 240) where pampered students “sip sherry with the dons every afternoon” (Craig 2015, 119). I am not going to engage much with these silly caricatures of posh universities with their stereotypical lazy rivers and climbing walls. (I’m not sure how climbing walls became symbols of opulence, but that’s another matter.) It’s certainly not worth defending the few institutions that choose to spend money on extravagant amenities when the majority of college campuses are, if anything, underfunded. And while it’s important to discuss the effects of big-time college athletics on the culture of college, this is not a book about that either. This is a book about learning, and my concern is with the substance of unbundlers’ arguments on that topic. In particular, I’m interested in their claim that because colleges and universities are trying to be too many things to too many people, they fail at their central goal of educating students.

Of course I’m also interested in the unbundlers’ proposed remedy for what they see as moribund institutions: a deregulated market of unbundled products and services offered by a mix of nonprofit and for-profit providers and subsidized by federal financial aid dollars. Unbundlers conceive of education as a commodity—not unlike “the unbundled cable package where you’re allowed to pick and choose your channels,” in the words of education journalist Jeffrey Selingo (2013). As this metaphor suggests, unbundlers imagine students as customers who purchase only the skills and knowledge they need to qualify them for the job they desire. They understand the problems besetting higher education as business problems, and their solutions are business solutions. Unbundlers believe that “many of the challenges facing colleges and universities are best addressed—and will be addressed—through the involvement of the private sector” (Craig 2015, 175). This might involve outsourcing to private vendors previously “in-house” services and products, from food service and housing to advising and online course development. Or it might involve spinning off units (learning analytics teams, information technology departments, or even entire credential-granting programs) into free-standing companies, as University of Maryland University College and Southern New Hampshire University have done. The ultimate aim of the unbundling agenda, however, is to dismantle colleges and universities. In the unbundlers’ worldview, we stand at the dawn of a new era of just-in-time, just-for-you education, freed from all institutional constraint. We are witnessing nothing less than “a complete educational remix” (Kamenetz 2015, x).

The rhetoric of liberation and empowerment for all is common among unbundlers. They posit a post-university techno-utopia, in which MOOCs (massive open online courses), adaptive learning, digital credentialing platforms, and the like take the place of slow-footed institutions and the ineffective, not to mention expensive, faculty who inhabit them. Carey (2015), for instance, writes that the University of Everywhere will “liberate hundreds of millions of people around the world”
and distributing content over networks, as unbundlers sometimes suggest. Carey (2015), for instance, writes: “We can already, today, replicate much of what colleges are charging a great deal of money for and distribute that information electronically at almost no marginal costs” (102). Teaching and learning are complex social and cognitive processes, not technical problems of information transfer.

If the kind of do-it-yourself education unbundlers promote will work for anyone, it will be for students who already have a great deal of cultural and economic capital. As Randy Bass and Bret Eynon (2016) suggest, first-generation students, students of color, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are most in need of integrated support and integrative learning environments (153). Ultimately, for all their bluster about liberation and empowerment for everyone, unbundlers’ version of American rugged individualism for the digital age serves the interests of private companies looking to turn a profit on labor market volatility and the resulting scrambling for credentials. Unbundling will expand social and economic inequality, leaving our most vulnerable citizens prey to what Tressie McMillan Cottom (2017) calls “lower ed” and to purveyors of government-subsidized junk credentials.

Unbundlers doubtless have varying motives, some of them laudable; however, we must understand unbundling as part of a decades-long, coordinated, libertarian campaign to undermine higher education as a “government monopoly.” This is right out of the neoliberal playbook of creating austerity through disinvestment, sowing public distrust in public institutions, and then advocating privatization as the only viable option. The federal government is busily gutting safeguards against predatory for-profit education providers and rolling out a far-ranging deregulation agenda. The Trump administration is questioning the value of degrees relative to shorter-term credentials, at least for low- and medium-skilled workers, despite clear evidence that those jobs will soon be performed by robots. None of this can come as a surprise in a cultural moment when expertise, evidence, science, reason, and even truth itself are cast by authoritarian faux populists as “elitist.” But it doesn’t look good for higher ed as we’ve known it.
Integrating Institutions for Integrative Learning

And here I come, calling for integrating institutions for integrative learning. Aren’t institutions passe? Shouldn’t we just blow them up? And isn’t integrative learning an old idea?

I admit that integration is an old-fashioned and decidedly unsexy term. Perhaps compared to the nostalgic laments and the breathless prophecies that often constitute commentary on US higher education, this book’s case for integration will strike many readers as moderate, maybe even conservative. Fair enough in one sense: I do believe that colleges and universities remain critical, even indispensable, to American culture and society. I regard them as social institutions of enduring value, worthy of both nurturing and relentless scrutiny. I want to strengthen them, not blow them up.

Mine is not, however, an argument against educational innovation—far from it. In particular, I agree with unbundlers that higher education needs to be more flexible to allow for more personalized lifelong learning for a much broader swath of our society. But I think integrated institutions are best equipped to achieve that goal. What unbundlers are talking about is really mass customization, as if picking learning experiences were the same as picking iPhone colors. (Though even that “mass” is generous, since only those with economic and cultural capital are likely to benefit from unbundling higher education.) Customization provides the veneer of personalization by offering a highly restricted set of “choices” among prefabricated products that can be mixed and matched. This way, the customer feels some sense of power without the vendor having to learn anything meaningful about the customer. Institutions, by contrast, can offer truly personalized lifelong learning because they—their faculty, their staff, their students, their alumni—can get to know learners, forming relationships with them that extend beyond a one-time transaction for a one-off product. Integrated institutions marshal their resources to support self-directed learning: all parts of the institution work together to support the learner.

I will go one step further and say that integration, properly understood, is radical. Take the most common use of the term in education: bringing together into the same school or school system children and adults of diverse backgrounds. This is itself a significant achievement, one that schools in many cities continue to struggle toward. But integration is not just a matter of assembling different folks in the same building. We might as well call that bundling. A truly integrated school is one in which the diverse perspectives, values, beliefs, and assets of the assembled students and teachers are confronted, engaged, and synthesized into a new whole. Not assimilated: integration does not require that constituent parts disappear or cease to have their own identity. They maintain their own integrity even as they are integral to the shared enterprise. Considered this way, integration is even more radical than the currently buzzy educational term inclusión, which promises only that diverse individuals and their backgrounds will be present and represented, not necessarily that they are integral to the creation of a coherent whole.

If we attend to the radical implications of integration, what I’m proposing is more “disruptive” than unbundling. As I’ve suggested, unbundling is an unimaginative solution (Privatize! Let the market rule!) to an inadequately defined problem (Workers need job skills!). It offers lazy thinking (Colleges are just like cable packages!) and fairy-tale narratives (Technology will liberate millions!). It amounts to outsourcing higher education to the private sector. Integrating institutions of higher learning, on the other hand, requires the hard work of redesigning colleges and universities as complex organizations operating within complex systems in a complex world.

Despite unbundlers’ critique that colleges and universities are inefficient, they are organized according to the efficiency principle. That is, they are highly bureaucratic, hierarchical institutions designed to get the most output from their constituent operations with the smallest possible investment of resources. They are already only loosely bundled. The different parts of the organization—disciplines, academic units, programs, types of faculty and students, credentialing options—are not well coordinated and do not mutually reinforce each other. This is why in most institutions it’s difficult to launch and manage even modest innovations across units, such as cross-listed and co-taught courses or
joint faculty appointments. Indeed, institutional actors are typically engaged in a fierce internal competition for increasingly scarce resources. In this era of decreased public financial support for higher education, the efficiency principle has manifested in a variety of austerity measures, from program cuts to staff reductions to increased reliance on part-time teaching faculty. These actions may result in small savings in one part of the operation, but they undermine the enterprise as a whole.

This is precisely what happens when one tries to improve complex systems only by optimizing their component parts: the resilience of the system weakens, and it begins to function as less than the sum of its parts. Efficiency—rooted in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s reductionist, standardizing scientific management—is fine for simple systems, but it’s ill-suited to complex ones. If the goal is simply to move pig iron from one place to another (one of Taylor’s famous examples), then it makes sense, from a management perspective, to reduce the task to its essential parts and then to devise the quickest way to accomplish it: the fewest number of movements by each worker, the optimum placement of those workers, and so on. But this kind of management does not work with complex systems in which multiple, interconnected components frequently interact, leading to unpredictable, nonlinear change. 

Institutional integration does not look to optimize the component parts of the organization; it looks to strengthen the interdependence of those parts so that the institution functions as a cohesive and coherent whole. Virtually everything about the structures and cultures of colleges and universities will need to change to pull off integration. In *The Uses of the University*, first published more than a half century ago, Clark Kerr (2001) famously described the modern American university as “a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money” (15). A better term, he proposed, was “multiversity,” by which he meant a host of competing and loosely associated communities: “the community of the undergraduate and the community of the graduate; the community of the humanist, the community of the social scientist, and the community of the scientist; the communities of the professional schools; the community of all the nonacademic personnel; the community of the administrators” (14). Even the word community might have been too strong: Kerr half-seriously joked that universities were “a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance about parking” (15).

Today, Kerr’s joke hits a little too close to home. The widespread adoption of corporate language and practices has forced faculty into a perpetual entrepreneurial scramble to raise their own funds and build their unique brands. Meanwhile, colleges and universities are increasingly beholden to external constituencies, particularly those that provide much-needed funding in an era of reduced public support. Institutional fragmentation continues apace as colleges and universities struggle to remain relevant and useful amid rapid and bewildering social, cultural, and economic changes.

At the same time, some innovative colleges and universities are beginning to recognize their unique value proposition in an increasingly unbundled marketplace and are redesigning themselves to integrate different parts of the curriculum; the curriculum and the cocurriculum; liberal learning and professional learning; faculty roles; and degrees and alternative credentials. These institutions, some of which are featured in the chapters ahead, are leading responsible innovation in the higher education space. Indeed, they demonstrate that institutions with integrated expertise in teaching and learning, integrated learning infrastructures, and integrated educational missions are uniquely positioned to offer learners the kinds of integrative learning opportunities they need to thrive in a complex, rapidly changing world.

Here at the outset, I want to be clear about what I don’t mean by institutional integration. First, I don’t intend to invoke a nostalgic, vaguely Cardinal Newmanesque ideal of the university as a community of like-minded scholars imparting liberal education to homogeneous students with the luxury of devoting themselves to the life of the mind in splendid isolation from the real world. (Not least because that caricature is unfair to Newman, but that’s another story.) Institutional integration is forward-looking, not backward-looking, and it promotes the porosity of boundaries within and beyond institutions. While it prizes porosity, integration is also not an attack on disciplinarity or specialization. It’s not an excuse for administrators to consol-
idate their power and break apart and take over academic departments and programs in the name of “synergy.” Divisions of knowledge—like distinctions between the curriculum and the cocurriculum, between liberal learning and professional learning, and so on—are not themselves insidious, and indeed they can be useful. Disciplinary expertise is more vital than ever in our rapidly changing, technology-saturated, “post-truth” world. The challenge is to organize our institutions so that faculty and students have regular opportunities to integrate knowledge, perspectives, frameworks, and methods from multiple fields and spheres of activity. What is to be avoided is not specialization, but fractionalization and the strict compartmentalization of expertise. Different institutions will find different ways to organize themselves, but disciplines and their faculty should find themselves strengthened, not threatened, by such arrangements. The trick is to design the institution to allow disciplines to mutually reinforce each other, at once retaining their integrity and becoming an integral part of the enterprise as a whole.

And what about integrative learning? Hasn’t that idea been knocking around for some time? Well, yes. Depending on whom you ask, its roots trace back to John Dewey or even to Plato, and it has been a popular concept in recent decades. A frequent subject of symposia, conferences, special issues of journals, and academic books, it has received considerable attention from organizations and funders, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Teagle Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the National Science Foundation. It’s promoted by professional accreditors like the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology. It’s an important feature of national and international higher education initiatives, such as Project Kaleidoscope; the scientific thinking and integrative reasoning skills framework; the program Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect; and the Degree Qualifications Profile. It’s a term of art at many colleges and universities, some of which house centers, institutes, or programs devoted to integrative or integrated studies.

Yet, for all the good work and hard thinking about it, we might say of integrative learning what Gandhi is reported to have said of Western civilization: it would be a good idea. If higher education really took integrative learning seriously, colleges and universities wouldn’t be designed as loose confederations, and unbundling wouldn’t have gained the traction it has.

Part of the problem is that the term integrative learning is sometimes used loosely: to refer to the mere juxtaposition of two majors, say, or as a synonym for “interdisciplinarity.” Some of its proponents claim that all learning is integrative, while others insist that only “outside-the-classroom activity” counts. In this book, integrative learning is what happens when learners connect and synthesize ideas, knowledge, and skills across contexts and over time. It’s similar to the concept of “learning transfer,” although learning theorists and researchers debate the appropriateness of this term (some object that learning necessarily transforms as it moves from one context to another, so “transfer” isn’t quite right), and they have identified different kinds of transfer—near and far, low-road and high-road, and so on. In general, transfer names what happens when learners draw on prior experiences as they construct knowledge and develop skills in a new context. This process does not need to be conscious or intentional. Integration does. As Rebecca Nowacek (2011) suggests, integration always involves transfer, but not all forms of transfer rise to the level of integration. Moreover, most discussions of transfer direct attention to the way learners apply or transform learning from context A to context B. Integration, by contrast, considers how learners construct new learning across and from contexts A and B (and C and D . . . ). Integrative learning is what happens when learners step back, reflect on their learning in two or more contexts, and arrive at new understandings.

The key to integration is that it’s not merely juxtapositional or additive; it combines ideas, knowledge, and skills from two or more contexts into a new whole. It’s what allows learners to be intentional about their learning, to articulate (in both senses of that word) their learning across what would otherwise be disparate experiences and episodes, and to craft coherent learning journeys. It is learning made whole. It is what we need to integrate colleges and universities for.