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Graduate Peace & Conflict Studies Programs: Reconsidering Their Problems & Prospects

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Barely 25 years ago the notion of an academic pursuit that I will broadly call "the peace and conflict studies field," was simply the idea of some scholars and practitioners who dared to think outside their disciplinary confines. Just as the Iowa farmer in the 1989 movie, "Field of Dreams," presumed that if he built a baseball diamond "Shoeless" Joe Jackson would come to play on it, the pioneers of the first graduate programs presumed that their new academic endeavor would attract students. It did! By some counts there are today 80 some graduate programs in the U.S. alone, ranging from certificates and minor concentrations to masters and doctorate degrees (see [Polkinghorn and Chenail, Conflict Management in Higher Education Report, Vol. 1, Number 2, March/April 2000](#)). The early program pioneers placed their endeavors under various programmatic umbrellas, ranging from "peace studies" and "conflict management" to "dispute resolution" and "conflict resolution." Using the concept "conflict transformation" to define (and perhaps also distinguish) the meaning and purpose of program content, is a trend that can be seen in some of the newest program titles here and overseas. Every year or so colleges and universities announce one or two more programs under one of these different program names.

When dreams become realities we often discover how exciting new prospects also bring new sets of complications and responsibilities. In this article I consider how peace and conflict type programs are created and developed, reflect on their prospects and problems, and introduce topics that I believe will have to be dealt with in the future. Please note, however, that my observations on this topic are not based on any scientific form of data gathering. Instead my "findings" are grounded in my years as a student of peace and conflict studies, my experience as a professor in several diverse

programs, and in listening to and learning from the anecdotes and experience of many colleagues. During the past seven years, in particular, I have engaged in informal discussions with colleagues in the field about how the field has developed during the past 15 years. I have also observed how new programs are being conceived and advertised at various academic institutions. Most recently, I also had an opportunity to gain and share some insights during the Conference on Current Trends in Conflict Resolution in Higher Education held in Greenbelt, Maryland, on November 10-11, 2003.

Peace and Conflict Programs as Academic Innovation

The interest in any academic program or field of study does ebb and flow. Obviously, many of the peace and conflict studies (PCS) type programs were created as a result of the sincere personal and professional beliefs among their inventors of how social conflict should be approached and studied. These inventors also had specific ideas about where in academic institutions such programs should be housed. Since then these early and somewhat individualized beginnings of PCS programs have made way for more structured and auspicious developments. For example, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) is no longer simply a social movement, but has an ever growing following in the liberal arts, and in business and law schools. One reason for the growth in new PCS programs may be as a way of capitalizing on a "hot new field." It is, of course, also a way to replace faltering older programs. Because of their interdisciplinary nature, new PCS type programs may be conceived as a sure way to enlarge and attract student numbers without having to invest in more than one (or at the most two) "start-up" faculty in the new program. Most programs lean heavily on the existing infrastructure of faculty and interdisciplinary course work. However, while a minimalist approach seems logical for programs that have yet to prove their viability, it can eventually negatively impact the quality of such programs and the satisfaction levels of their students.

The Mixed Blessings of Good Enrollments

Most relatively new PCS type programs report solid student enrollments. What makes this a decidedly mixed blessing is the way it has challenged the resources of these programs. Most educational systems in the U.S. are experiencing severe financial cuts and constraints and university administrators expect departments to make do with less rather than to support or reward fast growing programs with more. The response can

apparently be summarized as, "You are doing so well with what we have given you, now just do a little more." The ever-present pressure in universities and colleges for always better enrollment figures is slowly leading to concerns about standards and the quality of the education. It seems that some PCS programs (as indeed also a number of programs in other disciplines) are under funded and under staffed. This situation raises rather pointed questions: Are there minimum expectations about what such programs should provide, and, if so, are they being met?

The seemingly strong trend in student interest in the field for the past decade or more also leads to another concern: Are we overpopulating a field in which some students have difficulty in connecting their degrees to careers in several related professions and workplaces? What are the responsibilities of these programs and their faculty to assist their graduates with career opportunities beyond their degrees? Or are career concerns, as is often the case in the social sciences, beyond the capacity and accountability of such programs? As many faculty members can attest, a full-time teaching and research responsibility does not leave time or opportunity to work on creating a job market for students. Extra staff members to help graduates with skills that enable them to translate their degrees into positions in the field or related to the larger field do not, on the whole, exist for PCS programs.

In general, students who came to a PCS program with a "mother field" such as human relations, nursing, law, law enforcement, or social work find it easier to connect their newly found qualification to positions in a more established area. Students who have had no post baccalaureate working experience, and therefore, no existing profession or workplace within which to integrate their new found expertise may have a more difficult time in establishing themselves. To frame this concern in a somewhat different manner: Can an academic endeavor and a professional field still proving its utility afford to turn out large numbers of graduates who might struggle to apply their qualifications professionally? Fifteen years ago faculty in PCS programs responded to questions about how students will use their degrees by answering, "We hope that, in time, you will answer that question for us." That was a luxury that no longer exists. Adult learners now tend to be career minded and want to link their higher education qualifications (and the time and dollars spent) to specific work opportunities.

The Prospects and Problems of an Interdisciplinary Field

Some of the preceding issues are of obvious concern for many graduate degree programs. What makes PCS programs unusual is their interdisciplinary nature. Most disciplines in the social sciences claim some part of, or connection to, social conflict. The interdisciplinary nature of the field is one of its biggest advantages in getting the cooperation of a wide spectrum of other disciplines and scholars involved in the initial planning and implementation of a new program. Ironically, the interdisciplinary interconnectedness of such programs can also be one of the largest impediments to rethinking and restructuring a program a few years after its introduction.

These programs are often conceived as interdisciplinary innovations, and as a way of finding consensus between competing interests. They are instituted as intra-departmental arrangements to cross-list a number of courses, to provide faculty in a variety of disciplines to teach related courses, and as agreements about how many students each department would gain from the collaborative venture. Once established, therefore, changing or adapting a PCS program is not that easy because it can involve renegotiating the original arrangement. Moreover, changes that might be of value to the overall PCS program and its students might not benefit other departments. The logical outcome of these changes might be that students take fewer electives from other disciplines. It might even mean a loss of revenue for other programs—never a popular option. In spite of the logic of a requested change in the initial program, it might also not make sense in terms of the larger interdisciplinary package. For example, extending the core PCS courses beyond their initial number or responding to students' requests to provide elective course options that pertain more directly to their academic interests, might not always serve the larger needs of the institution. It is, however, perhaps inevitable that as PCS programs (and indeed the field) matures, the faculty and students will want to focus their interests more narrowly towards courses that relate more specifically to their understanding of the field itself.

In the meantime, curricular changes or even simply maintaining a current program require ongoing nurturing of intra-university relationships. What would normally be a matter of fine-tuning a programmatic focus and shepherding new courses through the necessary university governance processes can become an exercise in how to negotiate a web of other departmental interests. As many faculty members know, this type of discussion can be challenging and time consuming. Requesting, for example, changes in the content of a course may intersect with dearly held notions in academia, such as academic freedom. Faculty members often measure their status, or that of their academic interests, by the courses they teach.

Therefore, anyone seeking changes in a highly interdisciplinary and interwoven curriculum must first seek consensus on such changes.

The Peace and Conflict Domain

PCS programs and courses on topics such as negotiation, mediation, or ADR are perhaps most often taught via the social sciences, but are equally well offered in other parts of a university such as in law and business schools. This shared interest underlines the need for intra-university cooperation to prevent zero-sum competition over the PCS domain or certain courses. Cooperation on these matters across disciplinary divides, and even schools within the larger university, should at a minimum be able to eliminate duplication. At best, it should capitalize on the need for synergy between the different, but complimentary, parts of a university. One way of achieving this goal is to create a combined law (or business) and PCS degree program. Such truly collaborative projects between different parts of academic institutions can happen through a genuine dialogue among faculty regarding their program and faculty interests. However, these interdisciplinary dialogues can be complicated. In spite of their mutual interest in peace and conflict studies (or ADR), academics tend to interpret the field through their own disciplinary and professional lenses. These different lenses can lead to different understandings of what exactly the PCS “field” is, on where such programs should be centered within an institution, and on the type and content of the course work that should be taught.

The Three R's of Program Development: Resources, Resources, Resources

Once the issue of locating a program (or having inter-linked programs) in the university has been settled, all other issues about program building relate directly or indirectly to resources. Interdisciplinary programs often start on the smallest of budgets and then succeed in expanding far beyond their projected growth, as indeed has been the case with a number of PCS programs. For a variety of reasons such programs then need further resources to take them into the next phase of their development. The program’s core faculty members (few, it seems, are fortunate enough to have three or more) can easily become overexposed to their students. At this instance in a program’s development, students may exert pressure on the institution to enlarge the size and diversity of the faculty in order to enhance the quality of the curriculum. Such requests normally include a drumbeat for more practice-oriented courses, for more variation in course offerings in general, and for smaller, seminar-style, class sizes. Responding

to such concerns can become priority number one. Other varied provisions for program improvements quickly follow from both the students and existing faculty who by now have been able to pinpoint the shortcomings of the program. Among the most common requests are career guidance assistance to students, practice-oriented projects that faculty and students can work on collaboratively, time for outreach and grant writing, surveys to discover the students' needs and expectations, and exit interviews to see how students have succeeded in linking their education to careers. Administrative support staff or clinical faculty members could perform many of these tasks. However, beyond their core teaching faculty most new programs cannot afford that level or type of staff.

The one factor that ultimately impacts an interdisciplinary program environment such as a PCS program, is the level and quality of the institutional support it receives. College and university administrations very often recognize the importance of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary activities in public presentations and in written documentation. However, it seems that few among them provide the facilities, faculty, or cooperative structures to make that truly possible. For an accurate accounting of the state of the field regarding resources and other institutional matters of PCS programs we will have to wait for Brian Polkinghorn at Salisbury State University to publish his recently completed survey of 84 programs. This research examines a wide variety of topics relating to the historical development or path of each program, where each program is located within the university or college structure, how many full time and part time faculty are teaching and supporting the program, and whether or not the program faculty and staff write grants or work on a program endowment campaign.

Adult Learners

Building any graduate program with overextended adult learners (who indeed make up most of the students at graduate PCS programs) is a daunting task. Their responsibilities often make it difficult for them to take part in activities beyond attending classes, such as special events with invited speakers. They normally find training that occurs outside the scope of their program too expensive, and rarely have the time and funding to attend conferences. Many of them want to carry a full course load in order to resume their careers as fast as possible. This strategy often proves to be troublesome to individuals who have to balance their studies with a work and family life. Many of them also need financial aid and therefore have to comply with rules as to the number of courses that they need to take each semester.

To this background, faculty members have to resist the notion that the expectations of a graduate degree need to be relaxed for students who work full-time, as is the case with the student population of many PCS programs. Faculty members do sometimes make some concessions to accommodate the work schedules and other needs of adult students in how they structure their programs. This can range from not insisting that students take courses in a particular order to having more than one intake group of students per year. Such arrangements, while advantageous to students and enrollment figures, bring other complexities. Students who join a program at different times of the academic year do not really form bonds as part of a cohort group. The asynchronous fashion in which they take courses also means that the core courses need to be taught year round. This situation can put considerable strain on a relatively small teaching staff, and also prevent them from offering a larger range of courses. Normally this problem is solved by appointing adjunct faculty—a solution that is not an option during periods of severe budget constraints.

In sum, adult learners have their own idiosyncrasies that call for special attention. An ongoing concern (and the cause of much debate) is how to respond to their need for a more career-focused education. PCS programs are therefore always somewhat caught between the built in tensions of providing adult learners with a higher education degree which has academic rigor, while at the same time meeting students' career and practice needs.

A Field-wide System of Quality Assurance

I started this discussion by pointing to the range of programs that fall under the larger heading of PCS programs. Thus far the field has self-differentiated itself into various strands without an attempt at field-wide standards or quality assurance on matters such as appropriate curricula, course content, student performance standards, and program structures. While some programs have solicited review processes from outside colleagues and experts in the field, this has mainly been a private matter and not a field wide review or learning procedure. Has the time come to have a more organized, and perhaps more rigorous internal review of what our programs actually accomplish?

Leaving aside issues of how exactly such a peer review system will work, field-wide accreditation processes are widely used in academia. Our field could benefit from an advisory review or oversight process in which everyone joins in reviewing programs, and in being reviewed. The intent here would not be to perform an internal policing function, but rather to set

up a quality assurance system that would strengthen peace and conflict studies as a separate and distinct discipline and improve our standing within academia at large. Moreover, a review system would also provide programs with guidelines and some built-in protections about the requirements of the field that could be used as leverage in internal university negotiations. Accreditation rules, or even broad expectations about student-faculty ratios, faculty expertise, course content, and clinical training, could take the field to the next level of academic quality and performance.

A field-wide system of quality assurance (or at least enhancement), whatever its formal or informal character, could provide internal motivators to all concerned. It is one way of guaranteeing the future of this field. It is also, I believe, the challenge for the newer generation of scholar-practitioners in this field. Our predecessors were mainly educated through the traditional disciplines. They provided initial frameworks for programs in this field. Our task—as the first generation of scholar-practitioners with a more separate peace-and-conflict-studies paradigm—is to more firmly clarify the content and standards for such programs. Without it, I fear, the field could experience diminished returns in establishing itself as a freestanding and respected discipline.

Ultimately, I suppose, the questions that need to be answered are what exactly are the basic requirements for graduate PCS programs, and what are the minimum curricular expectations that would fulfill these requirements? PCS type programs are by their very nature academic enterprises, but they are also a part of a field that proclaims to have specific clinical and practical aspects to it. What then are the responsibilities of theory-based academic degree programs in a field that has a distinct number of processes and practices? Some of these issues are indeed unresolved concerns for academia and the field in general. Should universities, for example, be in the business of certifying practitioners? Or, where should the lines be drawn between training and “certification” versus graduate education? To what extent has the current emphasis, some people would say over-emphasis, on mediation narrowed the field? One could argue that it has actually lessened students’ understanding of the range of career opportunities in the field and the wide range of its application. The larger issue here, of course, is whether the focus on mediation practice in universities and elsewhere fully addresses the issue of how to balance theory and practice.

Moving Forward

Many of the concerns with PCS programs that I addressed in this article were discussed, and mostly left for later consideration, at the first national

meeting to explore the direction the field was taking that was hosted by the Department of Dispute Resolution at Nova Southeastern University in 1996. Let me repeat what I deem the most important questions: Are there minimum expectations about what PCS programs should provide, and, if so, are these expectations being met? To answer questions such as these we need a clear and shared understanding of the theoretical and practice-oriented knowledge and skills required for graduate education in this field. By implication surveys on the core skills and knowledge areas of PCS programs do document a fairly general agreement on these matters. (See, for example, [Bill Warters' article](#) in the May 1999 edition of The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution). Particular programs also put considerable work into defining the core competencies and indicators of success for conflict resolution studies. In this regard I have taken note of the Graduate Certificate Program in Conflict Resolution at Carleton University in Canada (see: <http://www.carleton.ca/law/conflict/goals.htm>).

There is, however, no field or program-wide agreement or official sanction of these core skills. Perhaps more importantly, there are to my knowledge no attempts at explaining exactly how these goals are achieved or measured. This pedagogical disconnect in terms of learning objectives and how to accomplish such goals, is one of the major obstacles in professionalizing PCS programs, and perhaps the field in general. How do we know that the mediators and conflict managers that we produce in any of these programs are qualified to do this kind of work? An agreement in principle on the basic skills and knowledge that need to be taught to aspiring newcomers to this field, does not assure didactic or clinical rigor. Nor will it move the perception of the field as one with "do-gooders" without recognizable abilities and expertise, to being acknowledged as professionals with demonstrated and tested skill sets.

In an earlier edition of the Conflict Management in Higher Education Report ([Collaboration and Conflict Resolution Skills: A Core Academic Competency?](#), CMHER Vol. 1, No. 4, Nov/Dec 2000) Bill Warters acknowledged that "expressed stated academic competencies in conflict resolution" are rare phenomena, and he wondered whether competency requirements "will ever be seen as an essential part of academic training." I would argue that creating such standards is another luxury we no longer have. More and more universities and accrediting bodies are accepting the notion of measurable learning objectives. My guess is that embracing rather than attempting to avoid such requirements might be in the best interest of the field as a whole.

Without trying to stifle individual program foci or needs, could we consider ways to steer our academic endeavors into generally agreed upon ways of achieving measurable goals? We have talked about "what" needs to be

known or done in teaching new generations of students, now I am looking for partners in seeing "how" to assure that this learning actually occurs. Is anyone else interested in another round table specifically on these matters?

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