



# *In Defense of Foundations*

## Introduction

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Guest Editors

Our goal in this volume is to provide a platform for considering and reconsidering the “foundations of education.” Historically, the foundations included history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, economics, and comparative education. Ecology, geography, and cultural studies focused on gender, race, class, and sexuality also fall under the broad umbrella of “foundations of education.” But the foundations are facing crises that call for thinking anew about what foundations of education means and how it functions, if at all, in the future of colleges and universities.

Some argue that the metaphor is outdated and should be replaced. “Foundations” suggests a field that is too permanent and too “essentialist.” What “counts” as foundations work, too, has been the subject of much debate. Is curriculum theory part of the foundations? What about media studies or communication? Who gets to decide these sorts of questions, anyway?

Differently, those working the general field are finding themselves replaceable: with more colleagues investigating issues of race and ethnicity, for example, courses are offered in departments other than “foundations” departments. Core courses are under attack by those who see foundations courses as esoteric or not directed enough at research-oriented questions. In order to maintain their relevance in the face of myriad challenges, foundations scholars have focused heavily on issues of diversity and have argued vehemently for the importance of understanding such issues. Here it seems foundations of education scholars have been both successful and a failure: successful at encouraging more people to investigate diverse questions, but also failing at clarifying (or persuading) others of the importance, centrality, and relevance of foundations coursework.

The articles in this special edition of *Critical Questions in Education* explore these tensions and address the questions raised above in a variety of ways. Indeed, this volume is expressly *not* about defending a status quo notion of foundations of education. We are interested in how others consider the broader topic, navigate institutional politics, and successfully preserve or expand coursework in the foundations of education. Should foundations scholars “embed” themselves in a variety of departments or argue in favor of a centralized department? Should we teach more courses online or are the kinds of courses representative of foundations more likely to benefit from face-to-face interaction? Are there other options that we might consider that do not reinforce false binaries or assumptions?

The following collection includes arguments in favor of developing new programs and departmental offerings that stand alone, i.e., are not dependent on “core” offerings. Aaron Schutz and Dan Butin fall into this category, as they illustrate how a department at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee built upon the need for community organizing and not-for-profit groups. Similarly, if distinct, Isabel Nuñez and Pamela Konkol prove a unique telling of how they successfully defended the foundations in their educational studies initiative. Theirs is a narrative of

hope and optimism because, at a time when many foundations programs are contracting, they were successful at navigating institutional politics to enable a new department to come into being—one that merges theory and practice in interesting ways.

Differently, and more somberly, Joe DeVitis and William H. Schubert offer autobiographical and historical ideas about the place, role, and function of foundations of education. DeVitis argues that the foundations of education could be more relevant to the public, which he believes is currently not the case. His argument is that foundations faculty could be more relevant if they spoke in the language of the public, rather than in the academically abstract ways they currently do. At the same time, he thinks leaning toward an interdisciplinary “liberal arts” orientation is better than turning to online technorationality. Schubert offers an autobiographical account of his “life in foundations.” Retired, like DeVitis and Len Waks, Schubert laments the mindlessness he sees as characteristic of the push toward STEM mandates and corporate logics now influencing colleges and universities. His narrative also offers us an important telling of the history of the foundations of education as well as philosophically normative arguments to consider in what he optimistically suggests are the best consequences of foundations inquiry: edification, inspiration, and wonder.

Len Waks argues somewhat confidently that the foundations should align themselves with other fields of knowledge, highlighting their expertise in analyzing knowledge in diverse environments as well as their interdisciplinary nature. But Waks, differently from DeVitis and Schubert, identifies key trends associated with the computer age. Waks is not afraid of online learning and suggests that foundations courses may have to embrace “distance learning” if the general field is to survive.

In offering a plea in the form of an “open letter” to administrators in colleges and universities, Kathleen deMarrais outlines her rationale in support of foundations courses. She is hopeful that the core values of foundations—e.g., the importance of interpretive, normative, critical frameworks—will not be lost in the exchange between core values and instrumentality. Realizing that methods courses are highly sought, she admits that the difficult work that constitutes foundations of education is nonetheless vital for deans of colleges to understand. She uses institutional realities like credit hour generation and NCATE certification to outline and clarify how foundations courses and foundations scholars are uniquely important to the success of a college of education. How many deans might read and understand her persuasive arguments?

Similarly concerned with strategies of survival, the logic of Susan Laird’s article identifies the maladies affecting the foundations as well as the historical and current reasons for the foundations. Her essay ends on a rather sanguine tone, specifically that the intellectual reasons for the foundations (critical questioning, ethical motivations) have been historically irrepressible. The article suggests the foundations should act more like women’s studies in defending programs that create partnerships with those inside and outside the academy, and which rely less on the current logic of assessments and more on acting politically (e.g., go directly to the places in which women’s studies are threatened to show solidarity and to argue for the programs rather than simply offer data on how well they satisfy market-driven indicators). Foundations faculty should keep doing what they do best (critical questioning), avoid accepting rewards that undermine their core intellectual and moral origins, and, as stated before, form partnerships with those in the arts and humanities and various communities inside and outside academe.

Fuad Al-Daraweesh suggests that the foundations can offer a balance between the oppressive aspects of capitalism and the liberatory aspects of democracy. This balance is possible because the foundations, by focusing on inequality and injustice, mitigate against the corruption that is endemic to capitalism. The logic here is that once our students, and all those who come into contact with us, “see” this inequality and injustice (because of our work), it will spark dem-

ocratic change. With a focus on communicative competence, Al-Daraweesh argues that what is important about foundations is its ability to help us see the light, so to speak.

Kip Kline and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz situate ideas about schooling within existentialism. Questioning whether we are facing a crisis of dehumanization, they underscore the anxiety felt by educators on all levels and point out how such anxiety might be productive. They interrogate the teacher as an ethical subject and critically consider how reform efforts revise, reductionistically, what it means to be a professional. They also provide a rationale for why philosophy is vital to the project of understanding and making meaning out of education policy.

Richard Quantz considers getting rid of education altogether. His essay challenges us to understand the role of educational inquiry in terms of ritual. Contrary to Waks' urging that we embrace at least part of the technological elements of current society, Quantz investigates what it means to understand initiatives like Coursera and edX as problematic challenges. Quantz also helps illustrate the value of foundations courses by sharing his experiences in his classes and how they help clarify the value and conundrum foundations courses represent. Ultimately, he sees foundations courses as providing a means through which rationality is critiqued and nonrationality promoted in order that students from a wide variety of majors are better able to understand and make meaning of the world.

In line with many of the essays criticizing the diminution of foundations of education, David Gabbard and Lori J. Flint provocatively argue that teacher education programs are actually at fault for pushing foundations to the brink of extinction. They highlight the tensions between foundations courses and methods courses and how the latter are vaunted for their applicability and the former criticized for being too theoretical. They also urge us to reconsider the institutional values that constitute schools and how compulsory education, external mandates for economic productivity, and a reliance on "what works" ideology fails at helping make U.S. society both democratic and critically transformative.

In Michael Gunzenhauser's view, understanding the important social status that professionalization offers an occupation, argues that the foundations can offer education the kind of professionalism it needs to counter some of the external forces undermining teachers. He correctly points out the anti-democratic aspects of professionalization but does not believe the foundations need to buy into them. This seems a desirable stance for the foundations, though we wonder whether it is possible to have professional status, autonomy and pro-democratic intentions, for the latter seems to us to suggest less professional autonomy in our work than many of us would like. If we are to be more democratic, do we risk undermining our expertise?

Taken together, the articles in this special edition all correctly identify the maladies that resulted in the decline of the foundations, not only as stand-alone areas of inquiry but as being deemed as necessary for offering knowledge that every teacher or leader or counselor, etc., should know. So that, yes, the corporatization of education, the standardization of knowledge, the instrumentalist views of education, the consumerist model of what should be taught, and so on, are all accepted and explained in most, if not all, these essays. The value of the foundations is also generally accepted in these pieces. Their value is the interpretive, normative, and critical analyses of society and schools that foundations are deemed to offer.

That so much is commonly assumed in these articles, not only about the problems and values of the foundations, but also about the fact that the foundations scholar is deemed as a unique entity, makes us wonder if we have become insular. We cite each other, talk to each other, and believe in a similar sense of purpose. This is understandable since it reflects our professional training and socialization, but is it possible that our insularity blinds us to the fact that the phenomena we see in the foundations are actually happening everywhere—the humanities, the arts, the social sciences, and even those non-applied research aspects of the physical sciences—

and, as such, is there a defense of the foundations if such a defense must entail the academy as it is currently structured? The arguments we make for the foundations and what is ailing them is really an argument that can be made in many sectors of the academy, and these arguments wind up being a defense of the academy as being above the fray of politics, one in which it must assert an intensely unique (non-instrumentalist) role. But does such a defense necessarily entail a (paradoxical?) separation from the public, politically and ethically? Does an argument about knowledge's value to the public (an instrumentalist value, we argue) keep the academic aligned to the public, but in doing so, also require the academic to suffer the consequences of ready intervention by the public into her autonomy? Can we have it both ways?

If the foundations are valuable to "the public," and such an argument is to be made within the confines of colleges and universities, then we wonder if such an argument amounts to what Freud would term a death drive. For the argument's logic presupposes that the foundations scholar must be ready to concede that the public has the right to require her to change course, for her ethical and political commitments are to the public. And thus the foundations scholar may be forced to do something that is not aligned with her vision of herself as working for the public, or, conversely, she may have to start carving out publics she will listen to and those she will ignore, which means, of course, letting go of the idea of "the public" and working only for those that further her own interests. The foundations scholar may argue that as a professional, the academic should have the autonomy to decide toward which direction her work should go, but, then, does that not entail a social (and historically-verified, antagonistic) separation from the public she purports to serve? One could argue that knowledge is valuable for its own sake—that the foundations scholar must be allowed to follow knowledge where it leads—but that argument entails a separation of the academic from the consequences such knowledge will have on the public. In short, does the idea of the academic serving the public require some consideration for what serving the public assumes and means?

Does our defense of the foundations as we currently believe in them represent nostalgia and lament? Are we nostalgic about some believed time when things were different, when the foundations were valued more than they are today, when the foundations had a sense of shared purpose? If so, this nostalgia may be necessary, for it permits us to think that we are not off track, but does it take us anywhere other than backwards? If so, what would that backwards be like? If there was a time of shared values and purpose, might it not be because everyone was more alike than not, physically and intellectually? Now that institutions of higher education (and schools themselves) are more open to people and other ideas traditionally excluded, can there be shared values and purposes? We agree with the authors in this volume that diversity in the foundations is important and that we should argue for their inclusion in curricula. But might the argument about what is ailing the academy—an argument that we believe is at the root of our defense of the foundations—be read as subterfuge for railing against this diversity, this openness? We certainly make this accusation when we talk about the political right's rant against changing times, and so might some introspection be warranted here about ourselves?

In addition to this nostalgia, we also sense a similar lament. A lament for what is not possible in the U.S., or anywhere perhaps. Are we lamenting the absence of the public intellectual, as we imagine Dewey to have been or could have been had American anti-intellectualism not been true? Are we lamenting the absence of the kind of organic intellectual (in a Gramscian sense) that our training, our readings, and our sense of identity makes us believe is possible about ourselves? Anti-intellectualism in the U.S. has been a structural condition of its existence and political forms of governing, but the academic has historically been given a kind of professional freedom to avoid having to think about those things. He was in an ivory tower, which current economic and political forces are tearing apart. And so might we now be lamenting the absence

of organic intellectuals? More precisely, because of the incursions in academic life by myriad forces that the authors in this volume nicely explain, might we be lamenting our inability to ignore or to avoid caring about such forces?

In a large sense, our ability to offer these questions, to see ourselves within multiple social and political contexts, and to offer our students histories of the present, is why we believe strongly in the foundations; they entail fields of knowledge predisposed to such inquiry. But when we do we must attend to the academic scholar as a social role, especially when we argue that in order to survive, we should find a place within the current system, or to argue for ourselves in ways attractive to those with the purse strings. For we know from tenure games and hazing games and grant games, and so on, that once we accept the rules of the game, not only will we be bound by them (we are bound whether we accept them or not), we will enforce them on others, we will standardize them in the name of the “rule of law,” we will reproduce them to institutionalize them, and thus our future roles will be determined by them. Knowing this, can we re-imagine what it might mean to be a foundations scholar within increasingly instrumentalist, corporatized institutions? If so, what is required and how might we bring it about?

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