

The Trouble (and Opportunities) With Ed Schools in the Research University

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Bemoaning and Diagnosing Ed Schools

David Labaree, writing in 1996 in his influential essay *The trouble with Ed Schools* (which he later expanded into a book of the same name) diagnoses the problems that Schools or Colleges of Education have faced, both historically and currently. Ed Schools, he points out, have seemingly always been a punching bag for the average citizen and state legislator, who likes their local public school and teachers, but have no respect for the state of public education in general, nor the institutions that produce teachers. Ed Schools, he writes, have responded to coercive market and government pressures only to discover that, in doing so, they put themselves in the unenviable but necessary position of catering to stigmatized populations that results in indictment by association. Ed Schools have played into the perception that they take in low quality students, and produce low quality graduates who don't benefit from the social mobility a college degree in the same way as do the graduates of engineering and business schools.

At the time Labaree was writing, an influential group of Ed School leaders (including deans) had penned several essays bemoaning and excoriating Ed Schools for their failure to modernize, establish connections with public schools, and push for education reform. This was the last straw; even Ed Schools' leaders had piled on to the bandwagon. Yet, Labaree's essay isn't all doom and gloom. After explaining why Ed Schools – rightfully in many cases – deserve their reputation, Labaree points out several features of Ed Schools that present an opportunity in the current political and social environment. These features include a degree with a job opportunity formally attached, a head start on conducting practical research about an institution that everyone cares about, and a history of delivering education

at a lower cost than many other parts of the university.

I find Labaree's work particularly illuminating and will use his short essay as a springboard to discuss what I see as the challenges and opportunities for Ed Schools in Research Extensive Universities, like those that bring together scholars and administrators to the Merrill Advanced Studies Retreat each year. In the process, I will explain why I think Ed Schools – for all of their real problems – may be positioned quite strategically in the modern research university.

The Trouble with (Research in) Ed Schools

Unlike some other parts of the university that seem well-suited for producing high quality scholarship, the Ed School is organized in a way that, to some

extent, gets in the way of doing research. Unlike degree programs in history or physics, teacher preparation and administrator licensure programs are subject to the accreditation whims of state legislators and entities like boards of educational examiners who make greater and greater demands -- some justified, others not so much -- of undergraduate and graduate degree programs linked to certification. These demands include specific coursework with defined objectives, clinical hours spent in the K-12 building or classroom, and requirements that instructors have experience as teachers, principals, or superintendents.

These certification requirements present real constraints to the research capacity of Ed Schools. First, they reduce the ability of Ed School professors to construct a curriculum that prepares students to be teachers and administrators and simultaneously take advantage of the research university infrastructure. The pressure to meet state requirements in a timely manner gets in the way of opportunities that students in history and physics might have to engage in time-consuming research projects with faculty or pursue a second (or third) major. This is true, as well, of the graduate students in programs tied to certification, many of whom might be interested in working directly with faculty on research projects, but cannot step away from their teaching or administrative positions to pursue a degree full-time because doing so would put them at a competitive disadvantage on the job market once they graduate.

Second, the clinical expectations present real challenges for the students and professors in Ed Schools. High quality

clinical experiences must be worked out with partner schools, supervised, and evaluated frequently and this requires resources -- including faculty time -- that otherwise might be used for the research. Research universities don't hire scholars to supervise students' clinical experiences, but Ed Schools must find ways to engage faculty in these clinical experiences and that can be difficult. Finally, the typical requirement that certification programs be staffed with instructors who have practical experience as principals or superintendents greatly restricts the labor pool from which Ed Schools might hire their faculty. It is significantly more difficult to identify and hire a promising junior scholar who has experience as a high school principal than to hire a new Ph.D. with an ambitious research agenda who has never worked in a school.

An additional problem consistent with both Labaree's diagnosis and problematic for research productivity in Ed Schools is the fact that Ed Schools tend to hire experts in education rather than experts in specific disciplines. That is, the typical professor in an Ed School is a graduate of, for example, an educational psychology program, not a psychology program. Likewise, the historians and sociologists of education were more than likely trained in other Ed Schools, rather than in history or sociology Ph.D. programs. This isn't to say that these scholars can't function as high quality psychologists or historians. They can and do. But there are disadvantages -- when pursuing grants or engaging with professional associations linked to disciplines -- that accompany being trained in Ed Schools rather than in Colleges of Liberal Arts and

Sciences. These disadvantages include being overlooked by foundations and/or review panels at federal funding agencies that are quick to cede the high ground (and funding dollars) to economists or other scholars who have PhDs in academic disciplines.

Research Opportunities In Ed Schools

Labaree ends his essay on an optimistic note, extolling the opportunities available to Ed School as a result of their connections with schools and their unique histories. I share his sentiment relative to Ed Schools' research opportunities.

First and foremost, Ed Schools benefit from a multidisciplinary approach to research. This advantage is the result of the same handicap that I identify above: the likelihood that Ed School scholars are trained in other Ed Schools, rather than in disciplines in the arts and sciences. Ed School professors are trained to think about education-related problems first and foremost. While they are trained as sociologists or counselors, their Ed School training allows them to consider questions from a perspective that incorporates at least one discipline and fundamental knowledge about schools as institutions. Ed School professors, precisely because they are not trained in a single discipline, tend not to be trapped in the same methodologies and conceptual frameworks that might dominate a discipline. A focus on schools and the problems that affect them also contributes to Ed Scholars' willingness to embrace collaborative research projects.

The recent growth in interest in schools and public education by large

foundations like Gates is a second potential advantage for Ed Schools. Not only has Gates' interest in schools and school reform opened up funding opportunities for research on public education, it has also shone a spotlight on education research. Gates' coattails are long and its interest has spurred other large and small foundations to focus their sights on schools and educational reform as well. Ed School researchers are in a good position to secure funding and highlight their expertise. Potential rivals are many; particularly scholars from disciplines like economics who have convinced many funders that their methods and approaches are more suitable than Ed Schools' researchers for diagnosing the trouble with schools. Ultimately, though, much of the best work on schools will be done by Ed Scholars because of their intimate and unique knowledge of how schools are organized and function.

Finally, Ed Schools have an intra-institutional advantage that Labaree acknowledges and that I believe should be exploited by more strategic university leaders. Ed Schools are relatively inexpensive. This advantage is manifested in several ways. Faculty salaries are one part of the algebra. Ed School researchers make less than their peers in the health sciences, business, and often less than faculty in natural and physical sciences. Start-up costs are less as well. While engineering faculty and those in the health sciences may require start-up packages approaching or exceeding hundreds of thousands of dollars, a generous start-up package for a junior faculty member in an Ed School might be one-fifth that size or

less. The start-up costs mirror the research costs of Ed School scholars. Generally, expensive labs are not required (though some Ed School researchers who study child development or use sophisticated methods that require expensive computer hardware and software may require access to physical labs). These cost advantages matter now and may matter more in the future. As provosts struggle with the cost of the arms race in the sciences, some may (and should) come to the conclusion that competing for smaller grants that incur smaller costs may be part of a winning strategy to build research capacity and pockets of excellence on campus.

Ultimately, the trouble with Ed Schools is both real and a product of perception. The real part is a function of what Labaree describes as Ed Schools' longstanding links to historically marginalized populations and soft, applied problems. That is not likely to change. The perception part is something that Ed School and University leaders can do something about.