Reimagining the Study of Higher Education: Generous Thinking, Chaos, and Order in a Low Consensus Field

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[**2019 ASHE Presidential address**]

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Hundreds of thousands of graduate students around the world will complete their degrees in 2020. Tens of thousands of them will begin work as faculty or administrators in postsecondary institutions. If all goes well for a number of them—and the institutions that hire them—they are likely to retire sometime around the year 2060. Whatever the sector may look like in 2060, let's assume there is still some fraction of young adults that will begin postsecondary education that year. If there is still any such thing as a bachelor's degree, and people who complete it in five years, give or take, many of those young adults who enter in 2060 will celebrate their 50th reunions in the year 2115. That is what we are doing today in higher education—educating

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students who may work until at least 2060, and graduate students who may end up as faculty and administrators welcoming new students who could work into the first decade of the 22nd century.

That timeline, introduced to me by Jon Western, a political scientist and dean of the faculty at Mount Holyoke College, framed my thinking about the ideas put forward by the ASHE 2019 program committee as we developed a theme for the conference. In order to generate knowledge, theory, and research methods that can hold up to the challenge of supporting the postsecondary sector through current shifts into whatever ecosystem of institutions and organizations it will be in 2060, and making sure that in 2060 it is robust enough to prepare those new students to lead lives of meaning up to and past 2015; That is the challenge that requires us to reimagine our work as people who study higher education. Because let's be honest: If we keep doing higher education research the way we do it now, we're going to be left behind sometime long before 2060.

I argue that if we want not only to stay relevant but also to influence the direction of postsecondary education, we must engage *the will to reimagine the study of higher education.* This afternoon I will discuss the challenges and opportunities for our future bound up in the fact that higher education scholarship is a low consensus field of research and application. And I will propose two ways of thinking about how we might approach this low consensus in ways that can help us reimagine the study of higher education.

In 1976, higher education researchers who participated in AAHE—the American Association of Higher Education, a now-defunct organization of higher education leaders (Renn, 2020)—formed their own organization, the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). And as the field grew larger and more diverse in all ways, a gap between people who research higher education and people who do higher education widened into a gulf, then the ocean we experience today. As the field has grown ASHE has become its own island within this ocean. And year after year ASHE presidents give addresses in which we describe the disconnect, propose approaches to reconnect, or offer examples from research that could be applied to make a connection.

Meanwhile, higher education institutions, state systems, and federal policy are on fire. This isn't news to anyone in this room. Leaders and policy makers struggle to survive within a context that has relied on unsustainable financial models, where wealth and opportunity are concentrated at the top of a pyramid, access forms an under-resourced base, and public systems based on geography and state boundaries are threatened by changes in population growth and the lack of public will and capacity to fund local institutions.

In this room we could put together a group of scholars using economics who study where and how financial incentives work within this system to leverage institutional action, or who use sociology to study how governance

structures mediate and political actors regulate, critical theorists who study how individual students and faculty experience inequities, and learning scientists who study what works best for adult learners. And yet, we're here at ASHE, where the economists will go to their sessions, the organizational scholars to theirs, the critical theorists to theirs, and the teaching and learning scholars to theirs. So when a policy maker faces a decision about, for example, financial aid, where do *they* go? With very few exceptions, they're not here. We left that room 43 years ago. To be sure, some ASHE members work in the nexus, doing research or funding research that is immediately applied in institutions, policy agencies, or advocacy organizations. But most of us don't. And this is why I've called on us to reimagine the study of higher education—to re-think how we do our work, with whom, and to what ends.

Higher Education Research as a Low Consensus Field

I'm not the first person to observe that education research in general and higher education research in our particular case is characterized by what organizational theorists call "low consensus" (Glynn & Raffaelli, 2010; Van Maanen, 1995). In high consensus fields there is a great deal of agreement about methods, theory, and even what count as important topics of study (Biglan, 1973). Low consensus fields thrive on methodological, theoretical, and topical diversity. Hard sciences tend to be higher consensus, humanities often are lower consensus. Applied fields vary—I'm personally grateful that high consensus engineers can agree on how to construct complex structures large and small to do the jobs they are meant to do—and I'm grateful that lower consensus historians have opened at least parts of the field to critical and decolonial perspectives. Indeed a number of ASHE members, including ASHE past president John Braxton have studied the nature of academic fields (Braxton & Berger, 1999; Braxton & Hargens, 1996; Smart & Elton, 1982), and some have turned a mirror on ourselves to describe the low consensus intellectual context in which we do our work. Most recently, Vasti Torres, Susan Jones, and I (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2019) discussed the low consensus nature of student development theory and its field of application, student affairs administration.

Coming into my presidency I was thinking about what some ASHE members have described as divisions or even balkanization among scholars of higher education. To be sure, some colleagues lament this division and experience it as a loss of their experience of ASHE and their sense of the field as a community with more consensus, which I venture to suggest it never was anyway. Others celebrate the visibility of more diverse theories, methods, and knowledge, feeling that higher education research has begun to live into its potential to describe and analyze the postsecondary ecosystem.

The Disciplines and the Emergence of Higher Education Studies as a Field

How did we come to our awareness of this lamentable or celebratory state of low consensus? I have observed two contributors, most of them not new though I hope to put them in conversation with each other in new ways. First, in the 43 years since ASHE was founded by scholars from "the disciplines," we have gone through a period of growth and development as a field—into a field I call here higher education studies. By the mid-1990s when I was a doctoral student, ASHE and AERA past president Bill Tierney was able to describe with concern what he called the "Jossey-Bassification" of higher education studies. By this he meant that with so many second and third generation higher education scholars trained by other people who had gotten degrees in higher education rather than a discipline like sociology, anthropology, or psychology, the field had become a homogenized survey course about higher education rather than a deep study of higher education well-grounded in state-of-the-art theory and methods from actual social science disciplines. At the same time that higher education studies was becoming a solidly non-disciplinary field, scholars in other disciplines continued to be interested in the study of higher education, and they became increasingly visible within their disciplines as higher education specialists. For example, we have Arum and Roksa (2011, 2014) writing out of sociology and Nathan Grawe (2018) writing out of economics.

We've reached a point, though, where discipline-trained and -based researchers who study higher education are again visible and audible in ASHE and our communities of higher education scholars. AEFP—the Association for Education Finance and Policy (www.aefpweb.org)—and APPAM—the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (www.appam.org)—have enough higher education scholars to form critical mass, becoming places where higher education scholarship can thrive and where increasing numbers of discipline-focused postsecondary education researchers go to be in groups with higher consensus —not always very high, to be sure, in some areas, but higher than ASHE where one finds oneself in rooms like this, with a lower consensus about what counts as theory, what matters as knowledge, and what are legitimate ways to study important questions. I recognize that there are and have been higher education scholars also well trained in disciplinary thinking, but the number of us who identify as a "higher education scholar who uses X and Y approaches" seems much larger than the number of us who identify as an "economist of higher education" or a "sociologist of higher education." The lower or higher consensus leanings of these communities within the higher education research landscape is a source of tension—potentially productive but also potentially detracting from our ability to think generously with and about one another. So that's my first point about consensus within our field.

The Emergence of Critical Theory in Higher Education Scholarship

The second point I want to make about how we got to this moment of tension in our experience as a low consensus field relates to the adoption of critical theory by people who study higher education. ASHE past president Estela Bensimon, among others, transformed the field through her organizational and intellectual leadership. In the early and mid-2000s, at the same time as discipline-based scholars were finding each other and coalescing into strong subgroups within higher education research and within their home disciplines, Dr. Bensimon and others purposefully cultivated a generation of scholars well-trained in using critical theory across disciplinary and general higher education studies. Through the ASHE/Lumina dissertation fellowship program and the ASHE critical policy analysis institutes they identified doctoral students and early career scholars working on college access, success, and equity using critical theories. With an explicit agenda to change the status quo in postsecondary education, this generation of scholars—whom, it must be noted, range in background from legal studies to sociology, history, economics, political science, and higher education studies—is now solidly established as faculty, institutional leaders, and policy makers. They capitalized on the low consensus nature of the field to experiment with implementation of critical theoretical perspectives in studies of organizations, faculty, teaching and learning, policy, and college students. Leslie Gonzales, Susana Munoz, Ryan Gildersleeve, and D-L Stewart now teach and mentor a new generation of critical scholars, while colleagues like Deanna Burt, James Minor, and José Cabrales take up leadership as vice presidents of institutions (Burt), leaders in the Cal State System (Minor), or in AASCU, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (Cabrales).

Without question, there is overlap across these groups that could be captured in a Venn diagram—there are critical theorists among the discipline-based folks and there are disciplinary adherents amongst the critical scholars. And there are other categories of scholars—such as the higher education studies-trained scholars who do not utilize critical theory in their work—contributing to the low-consensus nature of what I have broadly described as the landscape of higher education research. We do not share consensus on theoretical perspectives, methods, or even what questions to prioritize. We celebrate or lament what a "higher education studies" perspective offers alongside a more sharply defined discipline-based perspective; we feel constrained by the thinking of our colleagues or find their work loosey-goosey. We struggle to connect across differences in beliefs about whether our research should be ideological, activist, anti-racist and decolonial, or if it can ever apolitical, neutral, purely empirical. So we go to sessions mostly with people who think as we do, study as we do, and focus on the topics we agree are worth studying. We form our own ideological subfields that share consensus in at least some domains.

Advantages to Being a Low Consensus Field

There are advantages to being a low consensus field. We have more space for creativity and for valuing more than one kind of knowledge. I encourage you, no matter where you fall in the Venn diagram disciplinary or higher education studies training, to stop by the Performance, Video, and Digital Scholarship space at this conference to consider why a panel of peer reviewers selected these works for inclusion at ASHE. I encourage those among us who are settlers and settler colonists on this continent to learn about and take seriously Indigenous worldviews and the researchers among us who do their work using these perspectives (e.g., Davidson, Shotton, Minthorn, & Waterman, 2018; Minthorn & Shotton, 2018; Shotton, 2018; Singson, Tachine, Davidson, & Waterman, 2016; Waterman, 2019). Low consensus creates space for minoritized scholars to literally write our way into existence in the academy—just as the earliest scholars of higher education wrote this field into existence from their disciplinary spaces. We write ourselves into existence in the world through our research and representations of it. Low consensus lets us do this while still maintaining some sense of a community of higher education scholars.

Disadvantages to Low Consensus

But low consensus also has drawbacks. First, and where I believe we lose a lot of our possibility to have an impact on policy and practice is that when someone has a question they need answered—about institutional, state, federal policy, for example—they ask one question and get possibly dozens of different answers. Collectively we say, "It depends" and "Here's a bunch of options, you pick." I contend that this is part of what's keeping us on the island, talking to ourselves: When someone who wants one answer gets a bunch, they may turn to the most media savvy researcher among us, or whatever solution-of-the-moment a foundation is pushing, and go with whatever one answer they get. That's a drawback that works against us externally and keeps our work from making the impact we want it to have.

Internally there are also drawbacks. In low consensus fields it is difficult to establish oneself as "expert," and competition among theories, methods, space on conference programs, and in journals is fierce. Low consensus can feed facile negativity, criticism, and dismissal of others outside our corner of the community. It heightens the form of Reviewer 2-ism[1] that tells an author, in essence, that theirs was a badly conceived study, based on an implausible worldview, that adds nothing of importance to the field.

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[1]In academic social media (see, for example, Facebook group "Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped!" or Twitter user @grumpyreviewer2) "Reviewer 2" has come to stand for unnecessarily harsh, seemingly unfounded criticism from an anonymous peer reviewer. I use it here also to indicate the kinds of criticism scholars sometimes make of one another in settings other than peer review.

A low consensus field allows racism, transphobia, sexism, and homophobia to pose as dispassionate critique. A low consensus field can acquiesce to methodological animosity and epistemic violence in the name of tolerance of diverse perspectives. Low consensus can stand in for a non-critical relativism where mine is as legitimate as yours, even if mine contributes to your silence and erasure[2] And make no mistake, while some social science research has been used to advance inclusion, equity, and liberation, some social science research—including some in and about higher education—has been and is still used in service of oppression, denial of humanity, and erasure. So while I welcome the possibilities of low-consensus for generativity, intellectual vitality, and liberation, I am wary of the ways it maintains the status quo. I live uneasily with and in the tensions it creates in the field.

I implicate the overall systems in which are bound for some of these tensions. The neoliberal academy is located within an associated ecosystem of foundations, policy shops, state and federal higher education, and, yes, for-profit web of tech-enhanced so-called solutions that attaches to the sector. This is also not news to most of you. Certainly not to any of you on the aptly named job *market*, or looking a few years down the road at it, who are keenly aware of the stakes and worry about getting into the "right" disciplinary journal or the "best" higher education journal or a ranked graduate program or a fancy foundation-funded post-doc—all of which signal status in our low consensus field.

Low consensus makes it hard to discern what admissions committees, hiring committees, and foundation program officers and grant reviewers will value—so I see early career colleagues trying to cover all of their bases in an ever-escalating ratcheting up of CVs. Certainly some of the newer journals in the field have emerged to create space for newer perspectives that are not being received warmly in the gatekeeping journals, to get new ideas into the field; but some of the impetus for creating them also seems to be about creating more CV lines, whether in peer-reviewed publications or seats on editorial boards. Low consensus enables lack of clarity in expectations and promotes competition in new places in the ecosystem, as the high competition, low consensus field of higher education studies reproduces itself. In a context of scarcity and precarity—combined with hostility from within and from outside the places where we do our research—a low consensus context can elevate our sense of the stakes such that it can be hard tell the difference

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[2]In the original version of the talk delivered I included the following sentence, with quote: James Baldwin captured this tension effectively: "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." Although this quote is widely attributed online to James Baldwin, it is actually from author Robert Jones, Jr, who founded the social media community *Son of Baldwin* (Son of Baldwin, 2015, 2016).

between perceived threats to our ideas and privileged ways of thinking and real threats to ourselves, our colleagues, our students, and our freedom to pursue our goals.

GENEROUS THINKING

What does a low consensus field require of us if we are to reimagine the study of higher education? I propose two ways of thinking about ourselves and one another: I start with *generous thinking*, which Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2019) introduced in her book by the same name. The central premise of the book is "The growing sense that the critical thinking that forms the center of higher education today has somehow fallen out of whack, that is has come to be seen as privileging negation rather than creation of ideas and institutions" (p. xi). Fitzpatrick (2019) further observes that "Critique has become less a means of paving the way toward a better alternative than an end in itself" manifested as "a refusal to listen" (p. xi).

Now, before you get your thumbs flying to tweet about how I'm proselytizing for hegemony and against critique, please hear me out. Fitzpatrick (2019) starts her book with an anecdote: She assigned a recent reading to a graduate seminar, and when she asked them what they thought of it, students offered what she called "fairly merciless takedowns, pointing out the essay's critical failures and ideological blindspots" (p. 2). When she asked them what they thought the author was trying to do in the piece, they had nothing to say. They weren't trained and reinforced to do anything but critique. I've seen this in myself, my colleagues, and my students. In short, we in the academy have done such a great job teaching ourselves to be critics that we've all turned into perpetual Reviewer 2s. Fitzpatrick argues that we teach, model, and take up what Peter Elbow (1998, 2008–2009) called "the doubting game" without also pursuing "the believing game" that Fitzpatrick (2019) argues is a basis for "paying attention, listening, and reading *with* rather than reading *against*"(p. 2). We fail to engage in the kind of generous thinking that allows us to listen for what the other person is trying to say.

Now, at about this point in reading Fitzpatrick I went full-on doubting game—it's all well and good to encourage more listening and less critique *if you are already privileged.* In fact, telling minoritized people to stop critiquing and just listen is an old song that has amplified in academe and reverberated in our own field. Fitzpatrick is a cisgender white woman, professor of English and director of digital humanities at my own university. She seemingly has little at stake personally or professionally in encouraging graduate students to listen at least as much as they critique. To her credit, Fitzpatrick does to some extent take up issues of power and whose interests are served when the believing game supersedes the doubting game. But she doesn't take this case as far as she could or as far as many of us in the room would. Still, the core

idea that we so strongly cultivate and value critique over reading or listening for meaning is one that sticks with me.

It sticks with me because I see it in ASHE and among higher education researchers and the students many of us teach—and sometimes it's more than a reflex, it's a literal survival strategy. It's not just the postsecondary ecosystem that's on fire these days. Lethal racism and violence have been on this continent since white conquerors, colonists, and settlers arrived and then, 400 years ago this year, brought enslaved African people with them. Scholars of color have lived in this toxic culture, and the last three years have brought it to the surface, where even white people can't ignore it. It hardly seems like the time to call for less criticism and more listening. There are not, in fact, "very fine people" on both sides[3] of many issues we deal with in our research. It is exactly the *right* time to make sure that youth and students and scholars are expertly prepared to be critics, to fight with words and numbers, data and empathy. It is a fight for the literal lives of undocumented people, transgender people, people of color, poor people, queer people, and people who identify as women, among others. Researchers trained to critique and dismantle arguments may not be on the front lines of this fight, but we can certainly contribute when and if we figure out how—and we do have examples, of Liliana Garces and Uma Jayakumar, among others, on the *Fisher* case (Garces, 2013, 2015; Jayakumar & Garces, 2015); Sharon Fries-Britt, Adrianna Kezar, and colleagues using a trauma-informed framework to analyze the University of Missouri Racial Crisis (Kezar, Fries-Britt, Kurban, McGuire, & Wheaton, 2018); OiYan Poon and colleagues with the Harvard Affirmative Action case (Poon, Segoshi et al., 2019; Poon, Garces et al., 2019); Kenny Nienhusser (n.d.), Susana Muñoz (n.d.), Genevieve Negròn-Gonzales (n.d.), and Lindsay Pérez Huber (n.d.) with undocumented students; and Antonio Duran (2018, 2019) making the experiences of queer students of color visible. Even within a call for more generosity there is plenty of reason to be critical, and there are plenty of ASHE scholars doing this work.

Essential as criticism is, the lack of generosity can also be linked to context. Those of us located in higher education institutions—grad students, full-time tenure track faculty, administrators, and contingent faculty of all types—exist within systems and cultures that reward and reproduce *ungenerous* thinking. Real and imagined scarcity drive ungenerous thinking. And just as I pointed out how low consensus fields fuel ratcheting up and market thinking, competition thrives in systems based on precarity. Spots in doctoral programs, fellowships and funding, opportunities to engage with faculty—these all fuel critique of others, and too often also of self. Then

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[3]Here I counter a claim by Donald J. Trump that there were "very fine people on both sides" of the deadly August 12, 2917 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA (Thrush & Haberman, 2017).

the job market—the specter of which drives competition into and during grad school—supercharges competition and self-doubt, neither of which can tolerate generous thinking. Competition for jobs at the "hot" policy shops or foundations in the coolest cities, promotions up the administrative ladder, and the perilous faculty job market hardly seems like a context for generosity. And after five or so years of being groomed and rewarded like Fitzpatrick's critical students, generosity as a habit of mind may be hard to summon under this kind of duress.

Competition on the tenure track job market, as I hardly need tell people in this room, has accelerated. Let's be clear: When I was on the market post-PhD 20 years ago, it was competitive. I stealthily attended ASHE sessions to check out the people I assumed were my competition. The market's been competitive. But not like it is now. The job market is hardly a context that encourages generous thinking.

Then it's into pre-tenure years for the lucky ones who get those jobs, or back on the market looking for tenure track for those who end up in jobs they intend to be stop-overs. Generous thinking can be hard to do when it feels like other people—especially people whom I believe are doing scholarship that works against my own—keep getting the jobs I want, or the space in conferences or journals, or the fancy post-doc fellowships. In short, the overall postsecondary education workplace—institutions, foundations, policy agencies, media—is designed to promote critical thinking, criticism, and critique. It's not well designed to bring forward the kind of generosity that will humanize it. ASHE, academic twitter, and the so-called community of education researchers reward what my Michigan State University colleague Joanna Bosse calls "performative smartness" when what we may need is a thoughtful practice of generous—yet still critical—thinking.

As we look for the will to reimagine the study of higher education, we need to consider where generous thinking fits into our field, how we engage critically but also generously, and when generous thinking could be a trap that perpetuates inequity, exclusion, or sloppy research. Finding a way among higher education researchers to both doubt *and* believe each other, to read with and against ourselves and others—that seems like one important aspect of reimagining our field. That's my first idea for what our low consensus field asks of us as we reimagine the study of higher education.

MUPPET THEORY:
UNDERSTANDING ONE'S ORIENTATION TOWARD CHAOS AND ORDER

My next point, the second thing our field might use to address the will to reimagine the study of higher education is, of course, Muppets. More specifically, I refer to the folk concept of Muppet Theory, promulgated by

Dahlia Lithwick (2012), who is *Slate* senior editor and US Supreme Court columnist. I take you into this light-hearted folk theory for the opportunities it presents to us for understanding ourselves in the context of our low consensus field and the higher consensus subfields we construct and maintain within it. Bear with me. Lithwick's central idea here is that the world is divided into Chaos Muppets and Order Muppets. In a more formal exposition of this concept, social psychologist Michele Gelfand (2019) has elaborated on "rule breakers and rule makers," key ideas in understanding what she calls tight cultures and loose cultures. Tight and loose cultures provide a way to understand high and low consensus fields, who thrives in them, and how we might think about ourselves in relation to them. Some of you know that I do much of my work using human ecological models (Renn, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Lithwick's Muppet Theory gives us a way to understand the humans (us) operating within the ecology of higher education research and the postsecondary ecosystem.

Lithwick divides the world into two kinds of Muppets. Chaos Muppets are those among us who are gifted with vision, creativity, and some amount of disregard for playing by the rules. They are the Cookie Monsters, Ernies, and Swedish Chefs in our world who are not bound by rules or convention, who see beyond the status quo, who create space for others to see beyond what is to see what is possible. As researchers, they take us to new theories and methods. When we hear from Delores Delgado Bernal in Saturday's keynote, we will hear from someone who took up rigorous thinking to create a theory that broke existing rules about whose perspectives matter and should be centered in research. I can't say whether Dr. Delgado Bernal is by nature a Chaos Muppet, but I can say for sure that she enabled new kinds of research that could not have happened without her visionary, rule-breaking work.

Order Muppets, on the other hand, are those among us who are gifted with inclinations toward structuring, classifying, and prioritizing, with a preference for making and following rules. They are the Berts, Kermits, and Scooters, certainly the Sam the Eagles, who are experts on how to capitalize on systems and existing structures to advance ideas, to infiltrate faculty governance, or work as administrators to change from the inside. As researchers, they drill down into existing methods to create new formulas or standards for maximizing the potential of a study. When we hear from Millie García in her keynote conversation tomorrow, we will hear from someone who brought her experience as an equity-focused scholar to institutional leadership as president of Cal State Dominguez Hills and CSU Fullerton presidency, now to the leadership of AASCU—the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Again, I don't know whether Dr. García is a full-on Order Muppet either, but she leveraged a mastery of order to work for change in the field, as a campus executive, and now nationally.

So what's my point about Chaos Muppets and Order Muppets? For one thing, I urge us to engage in a little self-reflection. I ask myself, "Where do I see the Chaos and Order tendencies in my work, my worldview, and my ways of being in the wider community of higher education scholars and practitioners?" I ask myself "Where in my scholarship does my need to order, and structure, and discipline ideas, methods, categories of people bump up against my desire to queer things, to take seriously Indigenous and decolonial worldviews, to burn it all down and start from scratch?" And I wonder, "How do I engage with colleagues and ideas that run counter to my preferred ways of being as an academic and as a person?"

Dahlia and Gelfand point out that we need both chaos and order, tightness and looseness—they bring unique assets and they balance one another's liabilities, to use market-speak for a moment. Every chaos-oriented Fozzy Bear needs a Kermit. And we all know that Ernie couldn't keep house without Bert to make sure Rubber Ducky always ended up back in the bathtub.

Higher education researchers will never answer the biggest questions facing us and contribute to solving the most pressing problems in policy and practice unless we bring our Chaos Muppets and Order Muppets to the work. We need our most boundary-breaking folks doing their work *and* our more conventional folks doing theirs. We need boundary-spanners—people in or near the edges of the Venn diagram crossover points—to help translate across. We each bring our thing—it's about recognizing where we are, who we are, and how we might come to listen more generously, to believe as well as doubt.

Being an Order Muppet in a low consensus field may drive us into our sub-field more deeply, with people who think like us—whether that's critical or decolonial or postpositivist—and follow the same rules. Those of us who prefer order and structure may be uncomfortable with the free-wheeling, anything-goes appearance of a low consensus field. Those whose work emerges through creative chaos may find low consensus appealing, but even Chaos Muppets enjoy the structures and support that organizations like ASHE provide for them to find one another. To be sure, I may prefer low consensus in my intellectual life and high consensus in my organizational life, or vice versa. Lithwick (2012) was clear that the world needs both, and though a low-consensus academic field presents challenges to both Chaos and Order sensibilities, it also benefits from having both in our midst.

Let me be clear: I'm not trying to minimize anyone or any issue by likening us to puppets. I use this folk theory because it helps me point out that academic fields are comprised of individuals, not all of whom are alike in preferences for rule making and rule breaking. We draw boundaries around our field and subfields, and the rules we make and break define those fields. The tension created by co-existing order and chaos actors is part of the

ecology of our field. It's important to consider the experiences of individual actors within tight and loose organizations or high and low consensus fields. I think that some of the tensions among higher education researchers today can be explained by understanding individuals within fields as well as how fields in general operate. The lack of generous thinking is, I believe, in part a response to how we as rule makers or rule breakers operate within and experience our field of study

REIMAGINING GENEROSITY, CHAOS, AND ORDER IN ASHE

Now that I've laid out my ideas about the low consensus nature of our field as a whole, a challenge to think more generously, and an invitation to consider how we as individuals operate within chaos and order, I want to bring these ideas more fully into my observations of ASHE. As a field and as individuals, we are challenged to incorporate ideas of generous thinking and tightness and looseness. We are both enriched and challenged by the nature of being a low consensus academic field.

Without generous thinking, low consensus can bring out the worst of us as researchers in the ASHE community. I hear—and sometimes say—things like:

> "The student affairs people have taken over ASHE" or "The economists have taken over our journals."
> "ASHE is becoming NASPA[4]" or "ASHE is becoming AEFP."
> "STEM education studies haven't told us anything new in years" or "LGBTQ studies haven't told us anything new in years."
> "Their methods aren't rigorous" or "Their topics are boring" or "Why don't they see things like I do?"

Underlying all of these complaints there may be some elements of small-t truth, at least from the perspective of the person saying or thinking it. And underlying all there may be some elements of the scarcity model: If "they" get more slots on the program, more space in the journals, more tenure track lines, then there's less for "us" from our place in the low-consensus landscape.

So what's at stake? Beyond our own careers, why should we summon our will to reimagine the study of higher education, and possibly reimagine higher education itself? What is worth engaging our generosity, overcoming the chaos-order binary, and working within this epistemologically messy, discordant, even contradictory low-consensus field?

The stakes are indeed very high here. That imagined postsecondary ecosystem of 2060 is no joke: Sure, some number of highly resourced institutions will persist in some form. But many of the places where many of us work?

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[4]The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, a student affairs professional association.

Or the places that you doctoral students are going to work? Or our beloved undergrad alma maters—like my gender diverse women's college Mount Holyoke, or your HBCU, or that remarkable regional comprehensive that gave you, a first gen student, the chance to discover research at the side of a faculty mentor? I'm not sure that in 2060 they'll look anything like the way they do now.

In the not-so-long time since I began coming to ASHE—in 1998 when there were about a quarter as many people in attendance—we've already seen some radical changes in the scholarly landscape, as well as in the wider postsecondary ecosystem. Sure, ASHE presidents have been warning of this for a long time, but near-weekly announcements of institutional mergers and closings, staggering amounts of total student debt, and shifts in the wider postsecondary ecosystem are no longer harbingers of change: They are the change itself.

To return briefly to Bill Tierney's comment about the Jossey-Bassification of higher education studies, I ask you this: When is the last time you got a book catalog from Jossey-Bass? Some of us remember when they came seasonally, chock full of the very books we published on our way to tenure and promotion. But Jossey-Bass, a subsidiary of Wiley, has been paring away its commitment to publishing books, while Wiley has emerged as a major OPM—online program manager (McKenzie, 2018). Forget about Jossey-Bassification of our comparatively small academic field—beware the Wiley-fication of your higher education master's program—and well beyond that. In a similar vein, some folks here will remember when Pearson published those meaty ASHE Readers—a super handy way to get access to hard to find articles and chapters before the internet could so easily do that for us. It's not a big surprise that Pearson dropped ASHE Readers, which now seem a charming artifact of pre-internet scholarship, but they are now engaged in what Nick Srnicek (2018) and others call platform capitalism, a dominant force in the education, and postsecondary education, ecosystem (Chan & Mounier, 2019; Williamson, 2017).

Drivers in the ecosystem—population change, digitalization, increased capitalization of teaching and learning, platform capitalism—press toward high consensus. Social media and the 24-hour news cycle reinforce high consensus, though not necessarily evidence-based thinking, within screen-based sub-communities where "cancel culture" eradicates threats to that consensus. The neoliberal emphasis on the individual and on stratification wants us to put high consensus, masculinized disciplines above the feminized, multi-disciplinary area of higher education studies. It wants us to question the value of embodied and Indigenous knowledges. It wants us to quibble about who is "smarter" instead of valuing that "smart" comes in Big Data and analytics, in econometrics, in narratives, counter-stories, surveys, performances, and

methodologies we haven't yet imagined. It constrains us away from generous critical thinking. It seeks winners and losers in the competition for whose answers will be heard by the people asking important questions.

At the same time, we as a field—a low-consensus, multi-disciplinary intellectual space where chaos and order thrive, sometimes in uneasy proximity—have the opportunity to think more generously toward one another. We can figure out how to better serve the people today who make decisions about institutions, state systems, and federal policy and need evidence-based recommendations for survival today and planning toward 2060. We can employ the strengths of chaos-within-order and order-within-chaos to offer the intellectual, methodological, and ideological, diversity necessary to shrink the ocean and bridge the gulf that we ourselves had a hand in creating.

What will it take? A reimagined field of higher education studies and the will to enact it.

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