

## Teachers College Columbia University

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Institute for Learning Technologies

To: Lambros Comitas  
From: Robbie McClintock  
Subject: Reconfiguration of Philosophy and the Social Sciences  
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Although I've joined in support of the proposal to reconfigure Philosophy and the Social Sciences, I'd like to enter two reservations — first to the tentative title for it, second to the section on doctoral programs.

**First**, the title — the Department of Social Contexts of Education — strikes me as derisible at best. What does one do in such a department? Imagine the cocktail chatter caught in William Gaddis's next novel: — . . . *How interesting. You're at Teachers College. — Yes, in the Department of Social Contexts of Education. — Really? Never heard of that. Interesting concept, if I get its drift. But then, I wouldn't think it's really needed. You know, there's always some mother who'll put together a bake sale or some other social to fix up the school lobby and what not. I wouldn't think you'd need a course on such things. A whole department! How many of you are there? No wonder it keeps getting more . . . .*

I much prefer the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice that we earlier discussed. Our business is to produce scholarship about education, not merely its social contexts. The only verb that comes to mind in association with *contexts* is to *interpret*, a worthy activity, but not one that will suffice to ground a distinguished effort. Verbs that associate with *theory*, *policy*, and *practice* indicate more compelling engagements — to construct and test, to make and implement, to conduct and criticize. It seems a much more interesting name for the department, and a more accurate indication of what we should be doing.

**Second**, in a more serious and fundamental way, I want discuss reservations about Section B on doctoral programs. I think the section comes at the question from the wrong way round and builds on the most contingent and problematic features of past arrangements for doctoral study in the department — namely a specification of the GSAS departments invoked by the old name, Philosophy and the Social Sciences .

Let's start, not from the Department and its past preferences, but from the university — the American research university in general and Columbia University in particular. In American research universities, Columbia included, the study of many important phenomena results in two distinct academic structures, one a field of scholarship and the other a program of professional preparation. These distinct structures are not wasteful redundancies. They reflect the fact that significant phenomena constitute both important challenges to scholarly understanding and substantial opportunities for professional practice. The two concerns overlap but are not coterminous: what is of most worth to scholarly inquiry may or may not have similar pre-eminence in preparing professionals for effective practice. For instance, macro-economics is a major branch of economic scholarship, one of great contention among economic theorists and of substantial import in setting governmental policy, but one that is not equally central in educating prospective masters of business administration.

As a major American research university, Columbia University uses such dual structures in many of the areas it deals with. Thus there is a Department of Sociology and a School of Social Work, a Department of Economics and a School of Business, a Department of Politics and a School of Public Affairs, a Department of Biology and a School of Physicians and Surgeons, Departments of Physics and Chemistry and a School of Engineering. Even with the School of Law, which seems at first to be an exception, there are significant sub-fields in Departments of Philosophy, Sociology, and Politics

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devoted to the scholarly clarification of phenomena essential to the construction of a system of legal practice such as justice and legitimacy.

Unlike the study of economic, social, or political phenomena, the study of educational phenomena has been institutionalized in American research universities without this dual structure. Instead, a single school or department of education has been responsible for both the scholarly study of the field and the preparation of professional practitioners. As a major American research university, Columbia University also reflects this anomalous way in which the study of education has been generally organized. Teachers College, as a part of Columbia University, is its school of education, and as such it is both the Department of Education, committed to scholarship about all educational phenomena, and the Professional School of Education, committed to preparing professionals for effective practice.

With Teachers College, Columbia University, this dual responsibility is unusually explicit, however. Since 1898, Teachers College has been a faculty of Columbia University. As a faculty of the University, it offers two doctorates — the Ed.D. degree, which “emphasizes broad preparation for advanced professional responsibility through a program based upon extensive study in a specialized branch of the field of education or in an area of instruction;” and the Ph.D. degree, which “emphasizes research and intensive specialization in a field of scholarship.” As with the study of economic, social, or political phenomena, where the professional degree is administered by the professional school and the academic degree is administered through a component of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Teachers College as a faculty of the University independently administers the Ed.D. while a subset of it, specifically designated by the Graduate Faculties, administers the Ph.D. on behalf of the GSAS Subcommittee on the Ph.D. in Education.

In reconceptualizing doctoral work in our department, I think we should restrict it, except in a very few very special circumstances, to Ph.D. work. The Department of Philosophy and the Social Sciences has been, and the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice should be, primarily a department responsible for the scholarly study of educational phenomena, not the professional preparation of educational practitioners. I think we agree on that fundamental point. I think, however, that the department’s proposal puts excessive weight on the disciplinary base of doctoral work in the department. My reasons for this view do not concern parochial concerns within Teachers College as much as what it seems to me the fundamental intent, within the context of Columbia University, concerning the Ph.D. in Education has been, and should continue to be. Let me explain.

As far as I have been able to learn, under present constraints, the University’s language concerning the Ph.D. in Education is sparse — “the Ph.D. degree may be earned through Teachers College in designated fields of study in which the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences does not offer programs. These designated fields are Education, including education in substantive disciplines; Speech; and certain applied and educationally related areas of Psychology.” Too much stress on the disciplines is unwise, not because it is unpopular within Teachers College, but because the more we reify the disciplinary base of our Ph.D. programs, the more we run afoul of the stipulation — “in which GSAS does not offer programs.” Our Ph.D. is a Ph.D., not in the disciplines, but in Education.

Furthermore, the disciplines do not enter into the implementing arrangements developed by the GSAS Subcommittee on the Ph.D. in Education. Four area committees implement the specified fields —

- A) The experimental study of human behavior, growth, learning, and adjustment.
- B) The social, historical, philosophical, and comparative foundations of education.

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C) The organization, support, and administration of education.

D) The subject matter, methods, and organization of the curriculum.

Clearly the domain of our department is Area B and it is a very important area, for when one maps the definitions of the areas on the enabling language it comes out as follows — “Education (Area B and C), including education in substantive disciplines (Area D); Speech (Area A); and certain applied and educationally related areas of Psychology (Area A).”

Note an important implication of these arrangements. Our discussions over recent months have included a good deal of agonizing over our concern for the foundations of education. The general proposition we have frequently heard is that the rest of the College will not institute a foundations requirement and therefore a commitment to the study of the foundations is not viable. I think it should be evident that such a judgment fundamentally misconstrues the responsibilities of Teachers College within the context of Columbia University and the study of education in American research universities. The foundations of education are important, not because they are prescribed as required courses within the preparation of professional educators, but because they are a fundamental component of the scholarly study of education. Teachers College, within Columbia University, is responsible for both the scholarly study of education and the preparation of professional practitioners. Our doctoral programs should attend, with vigor and rigor, to the Ph.D. in Area B, that is, the social, historical, philosophical, and comparative foundations of education, and we should frame much of our staffing needs with reference to this mission, defined by the University as a whole. Like it or not, scholarship in the foundations of education is the doctoral mission the department.