

The (Un)Welcome Story?: Undertaking a School of Education's history to (re)claim, (re)member, and matter in higher education.

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This historical study focuses on the founding of the University of Redlands' (UR) School of Education (SOE) in 1924 as part of a larger project celebrating its centennial. As SOE's in the US weathered attacks on their relevancy throughout the twentieth century (Labaree, 2008), their contributions have often been erased in formal institutional histories. Centennial anniversaries are a way to counter erased pasts and tell more inclusive institutional histories. At the UR, the SOE's centennial was a surprise to many as its long history had become disconnected from institutional and collective memory (Assman, 1995; Fincher, 1987). By telling the founding story of the SOE, this paper helps counter the ways institutions and higher education itself has minimized the importance of education to organizations. It provides an opportunity to (re)claim and (re)member the vital contributions of the SOE and thus demonstrate how it has and continues to organizationally matter.

Full paper

Introduction

The arrival of the one-hundred-year anniversary of the founding of the School of Education (SOE) was greeted with disbelief and surprise at the University of Redlands (UR). A mid-size, comprehensive, private institution in Southern California, Redlands was founded in 1907 and has three Schools or Colleges at its main campus, including the SOE. Despite news of the School's apparent longevity, information about its past was scant – there was no institutional awareness of its founding date, no stories told or cultural artifacts displayed to provide glimpses into its past. Its significance had slipped out of both communicative and institutional memory (Assman, 1995; Fincher, 1987), with most in the university community believing the SOE started in 2000. Indeed, the institution's own centennial history omitted all mention of the SOE apart from that which could be communicated within three partial sentences, and the founding of the School was completely unaddressed (Burgess, 2007).

Without documented inclusion in the university's story, the contributions of the School have been erased, marking it as superfluous to the identity and mission of the institution – an unwelcome story.

The study

This historical paper focuses on the founding of the SOE from part of a larger centennial study of the School. Butchart calls this type of institutional higher education (HE) approach “the history of nearby education” often initiated by anniversary celebrations (1986, p. 15). Anniversary celebrations provide an opportunity to “interpret historical events in alternative ways” (Guhl & Hurlimann, 2022, p. 30), to discover and include that which has previously been omitted. Schools of Education may be particularly susceptible to historical erasure in the US as they have weathered numerous attacks on their relevancy during the twentieth century (Labaree, 2008). This historical study found and used substantial primary and secondary sources to construct a narrative of the School. Primary materials were sourced at school, institutional, local, and state levels. The interpretation of the sources was guided by ideas of organizational (re)membering, (re)claiming, and mattering. In this work (re)membering counters organizational erasure by revisiting and uncovering archival documents and writing a story of the past that includes the School (e.g., Vega, 2024). (Re)claiming counters misinformation with School agents able to have agency to own, bear responsibility for, and share the story (Bandura, 2001, pp. 6-8), and mattering is the product of remembering and reclaiming where the School's history demonstrates its institutional legitimacy, worth, and value. Although mattering has been conceptualized individually or for people with shared identities (Schlossberg, 1989), this use of mattering extends to the organizational level.

Findings

This study reveals that the founding of the SOE in 1924 came at a time when the institution faced threats to its survival from a changing and increasingly competitive HE market (Geiger, 2015). In 1919, university administrators examined how established competitors and the growing junior college movement encroached upon their enrollments and decided that to save the institution they would invest in education programming (Nelson, 1958).^[1] They hired their first professor of education, Westerberg, one of the few professors with a doctorate, and he developed an ambitious plan, negotiating with university, city, and state partners, to credential teachers. To get approval from the state, the university was required to have a SOE, and upon doing so, received the only accreditation at the university – indeed, the SOE was accredited before the university. Newspapers, alumni, students, and faculty acclaimed the founding of the School as a hugely significant moment for the university which jettisoned it into a new period of relevancy and booming enrollments. Immediately after founding the School, Westerberg also used his expertise and connections to persuade the president to seek university accreditation and facilitated the university's first two accreditations. These revelations completely change what is known

about the historical positioning of the School, thrusting it into the heart of the institution's mission and purpose, countering prior erasure.

Conclusion

Anniversaries provide vital opportunities to meaningfully reappraise the past (Guhl & Hurlimann, 2022), and can be particularly powerful for professional programs in US institutions whose worth and value have often been dismissed (Labaree, 2008). Revealing the founding of the SOE shows that the School was wanted and valued. It played a vital role in raising the profile and reputation of the university, increasing the visibility and credibility of the institution. It was vital to institutional survival and was a source of pride – a welcome story that connects our present and future with a past that truly mattered.

[\[1\]](#) All of the moments recorded here are supported by primary source evidence.