

**Hutchins School of Liberal Studies
Sonoma State University**

Report of Visit of Associate Professor, James C. Hall, New College, University of Alabama, and Executive Director, Consortium for Innovative Learning Environments

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Introduction

I was very happy to have the opportunity to visit with faculty, staff, students, and administrators at Sonoma State and discuss the current situation of the Hutchins School of Liberal Studies. I spent two days and visited four classes, spent time with current and past faculty, met advisors and support staff, and conversed with students from each track in the program. The program is thriving under the strong leadership of Heidi Lamoreaux and should have an important role to play as Sonoma grows and evolves.

Like many similarly embedded programs across the country, it struggles to maintain an appropriate educational economy of scale, while continuing to deliver the intensive liberal arts experience that is its signature. Workload issues complicate morale and can make it difficult for a program established to deliver learning innovation to be outward looking and forward moving.

These challenges are shared across the “innovation sector” of U.S. higher education. Some of our experience situates us strategically to participate in both local and national debates about affordability, efficiency and student-centeredness; some of our commitments make it hard for us to reconcile core educational values with pressure from external constituencies. It is important to learn to take advantage of local opportunities, proceeding confidently and celebrating the value of what we do, while also not being afraid to rethink basic practices to look for ways to advance the strategic priorities of individuals and groups across the institution.

Background and National Context

Between 1965 and 1975, hundreds of educational experiments were launched in the public higher education sector that hoped to make the undergraduate experience less a matter of cafeteria-style course selection and credit accumulation. A product of general social upheaval – the Vietnam war, the decline of in loco parentis, a general atmosphere of cultural experimentation – education reformers, both conservative and liberal, sought to make student experience cohesive, holistic, relevant, and attentive to life-long learning goals.

Some of Hutchins’ distinctiveness at this historical moment comes from their willingness to learn from an earlier reform tradition driven by the work of John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn, and Robert Hutchins himself. This tradition (c.1925-1945) was more attentive to questions of national cohesiveness and emphasized the identification of core texts and reading as a critical practice.

Not that many of the experiments have survived through 2013 wholly intact. Many programs evolved and became more conventional interdisciplinary courses of study while others took on campus general education and degree completion responsibilities oftentimes both a response to changing campus conditions and economic drivers. A few programs have regularly reinvented themselves with clear attention to the first principles of founders, while others have closed, amalgamated with other units, or slowly dissolved unable to convince students or academic leadership of continued need or relevance.

The current moment is an unusual one for that portion of the U.S. higher education market that self-consciously emphasizes their connection to a 60s legacy or earlier reform traditions. On the one hand, there is an argument to be made that student-centered practices nurtured in these environments are exactly the solutions being proposed to current enrollment bottlenecks, graduation and retention challenges, and concerns with career and life preparation. On the other, there is great nervousness that Federal and State intervention in the name of efficiency puts key educational values at risk.

The Hutchins Ideal in Practice

To an uninitiated outsider, the Hutchins program can be dizzying indeed: some nomenclature is specifically local and not always translatable or generalizable to the larger innovation sector. Multiple tracks, upper and lower divisions, and, above all, the peculiarities of K12 teacher training in California, make it very difficult sometimes to imagine on-going, inter-institutional conversations that would be productive.

All this changes when one has the opportunity to see Hutchins' instructional staff in action with their students. The program is rooted in skilled, embodied, and ethical conversation, and involves talented scholar-teachers helping students to mastery of key texts and ideas from core cultural and intellectual traditions. For me the greatest pleasure was seeing that there was a rich belief in the idea that dialogue and deliberation can be taught. Too often instructors in seminar-style programs assume that conversation and close reading are natural skills only a product of effort and will. Time and time again, I saw instructors make specific adjustments to a room, to a student response, to a syllabus, even to body language, all in the name of making explicit to students how mutually enhancing dialogue actually occurs. And students were not unaware or unappreciative of these efforts; they understood themselves to be product of a particular kind of education, and valued the efforts made by teachers and peers to make exchange lasting and meaningful.

In general, there was greater investment in teaching the practice of inquiry, cultivation of curiosity, than worrying about content coverage or ideological coherence. While a common critique of progressive enterprises like Hutchins is that they are too often a mode of indoctrination, I saw a remarkable range of opinion expressed and affirmed and the most consistent attention directed to building a shaping coherent arguments based on systematic presentation of evidence.

Of that cohort of late 60s schools, Hutchins tends to be more book centered than most.

They are less driven than others to provide maximum student flexibility, even as they remain richly student centered. Hutchins faculty and students take reading seriously as a means to promoting lifelong learning and to engaged, active citizenship. Perhaps the most distinctive and elegant and moving aspect of the program is that the vast majority of instruction in the seminars is delivered in around a table in faculty offices. At first I wondered whether or not this was just physically comfortable or productive of student attentiveness, but I really came to love – and found it echoed in student comments – the fullest integration of faculty lives with the act of teaching. Family photos, books and art work, and conversation come together in a superb message about the meaning and function of learning over the course of a lifetime.

Students:

I spent time with about 25 students distributed evenly from amongst the various degree paths. They were enthusiastic conversation partners.

Students consistently report satisfaction with the quality of instruction they receive in the program and juniors and seniors, in particular, are able to carefully and accurately describe program outcomes and goals. They are enthusiastic about a commitment to the liberal arts and recognize its important role to play in individual development

Students also recognize that the unusual relationship to teaching certification pathways creates interesting challenges for community building. Too many students find themselves on Hutchins doorstep, they say, because they get directed there by outside advisors with little interest in explaining the program's particular values and learning style. As such, there is some frustration – not unusual in small liberal arts seminar programs of this type – that there is a too large portion of the membership of seminars not pulling their weight or not fully invested in the program's key values.

Faculty

The great joy I have had in working with this sector of higher education over the past decade or so has been seeing faculty so totally dedicated to the teaching enterprise and believing with real and authentic passion that their work has value. The Hutchins faculty is no exception to this pattern. In conversation (with me, to be sure, but, more importantly, seeing it informally in exchange with each other) they express enthusiasm for ideas, patterns and problems outside their own narrow disciplinary orbits and speak in detail about the learning needs and challenges of individual students. They understand their particular role in the educational economy to be to inculcate in a self-selected small portion of students a love for the liberal arts, for dialogue and transformative conversation, and to produce critical thinkers able to utilize accepted practices of evidence-based inquiry and interpretive judgment. They are not put off that there is no great cultural enthusiasm for this work at the moment, little cultural capital to be gained, nor that the great majority of students do not make their way to their doorstep. They should be continuously congratulated for their dedication to their task and the passion they bring to the table.

The faculty were not unaware of or willfully inattentive to the difficult environment in which they were currently working, or the ways in which other members of the SSU community were experiencing the current public higher education context. They

recognized that they worked in a situation of extreme scarcity and that persons of good will and faith sometimes had different ideas about what the future of higher education might or should be. At the same time, there was a sense that sacrifices had already been made and that teaching and advising loads cannot be exploitative. There was an expressed fear at an evolution of the program that saw the majority of instruction be given to adjunct or other contingent labor. Right now, Hutchins faculty teach the equivalent of 18 units per semester, a workload more typically of a strapped community college rather than an ambitious regional, comprehensive university.

It is probably time to revisit in an open way the sustainability of such workloads. But, to do so, it's probably true that faculty will need to be open to putting everything on the table including the very shape of the lower division seminars themselves. It won't be a popular activity, but I think some investigation of whether 12 unit blocks invite a kind of institutional misrepresentation of work. Fair or not, administrators (and to some extent the public itself) tend to think in terms of "courses taught" and not in terms of actually labor expended. If the 12 unit seminars were actually recorded as four different 3 unit components I wonder if there would be a casualness about a faculty member talking about teaching six separate course preparations? In seminar programs like these faculty believe deeply in the integrity and challenge of such intensive learning and reading experiences, but it only makes sense to ask questions about the optics involved.

The faculty were clearly happy with current leadership in the program and believed that they had a strong and articulate advocate in Professor Lamoreaux.

Program Structure

As I previously highlighted, the past 40 years has been a mixed bag for experimental programs. Despite the mainstreaming of key ideas – small seminars, empowering student ambition and learning, inquiry and problem driven course structures – it has been hard to find a sustainable economy of scale that produces needed credit hour production, "majors," and graduates. Hutchins has been fortunate to have shaped a set of educational pathways that feed the teacher certification needs of the state of California. It seems to have provided some long-term security, sense of purpose, and guaranteed work where other programs have suffered through pendulum shifts in cultural enthusiasm for distinctive learning styles.

For an interdisciplinary liberal arts program that does not have large-scale institutional responsibilities for degree completion pathways (Bachelor of General Studies, for example), Hutchins supports a large number of majors. As I've described via account of my conversation with students above, this large number of students means real variance in overall programmatic coherence and cohesiveness. There is an odd kind of dissociation in a program that distinguishes itself with a set of educational outcomes not wholly – or perhaps transparently – aligned with student goals and desires.

It is also worth highlighting a similar sense of non-alignment or redundancy that a casual outsider observer might experience in the context of a modest sized College of Arts and Humanities. It is a complex, flexible, interdisciplinary environment that happens to coexist with other sometimes fragile complex, flexible interdisciplinary

environments (e.g., American Multicultural Studies, Chicano and Latino Studies, various interdisciplinary minors).

Student learning

Hutchins is extremely diligent in documenting student learning through a comprehensive (and labor intensive for the Director) process of portfolio development focusing on the achievement of graduating learners. There seems to be a sense on campus that there was a moment in SSU's history when Hutchins had a real leadership role to play in directing attention to the documentation of student learning. However, the combination of external accountability pressures that have required other units to get their act together and workload pressures that have forced Hutchins faculty to make difficult choices have perhaps diminished any sense of the program functioning as a teaching and learning avant garde.

The Hutchins practice is cumulative and relies heavily on student self-reporting and simple checklist markers of achievement of requirements and goals. Arguably, best practice now mixes student self-reporting with other diagnostics and course level assessments that align with more general program goals. While Hutchins students do not come to the program as a pure cohort, there do seem to be opportunities at gateway points to gather simple measures of key learning achievements, especially in the areas of critical thinking, interdisciplinary writing competency, reading comprehension, and self-actualization and autonomy. More active and authentic assessment practice today would involve sharing the duty of evaluating the current student portfolios amongst a subcommittee of two or three instructors, such that faculty-determined key measures could be assigned on a simple scale of "not achieved," "achieved," or "achieved with distinction." State-of-the-art practice would involve not only documenting that students have completed particular learning tasks, but some effort to document that there is a relationship between participation in the program's instructional efforts and intellectual and personal growth.

It's hard to do with a limited cohort, but I think the exciting – and scary – thing to do is to look for ways to focus on the accomplishments and experience of Hutchins' students by comparative measures. Ask institutional research to assist in the work of comparing how Hutchins students respond to instruments like NSSE to SSU students more generally. Be sure that Hutchins students are represented in the delivery of the College Learning Assessment, and don't be afraid to meditate on both positive and negative measures.

Resource Environment and Challenges for the Future

Like other public institutions of higher learning, Sonoma operates within an environment of diminished public support, calls for greater accountability, and increasing legislative demands for education aligned in a direct way with workforce development needs. It means difficult times for liberal arts units and an end to expectations of straightforward retirement replacements or growth in faculty lines that proportionally track increases in overall enrolments.

There is no reason to believe that this situation will change in the short or mid-term. As such, liberal arts programs need to be innovative in seeking out partnerships,

taking the lead in on-going quality enhancement efforts, and, in general, invested in the question of overall campus success.

The greatest threat to innovative liberal arts programs has always been one of passivity. “Sitting back” can manifest itself in multiple ways: (a) a kind of institutional depression, a fretting that folks don’t recognize your value or want your insights, (b) gambling that the cultural pendulum will swing back such that your key educational practices are once again privileged, or (c) a more active petulance, a sense of drawing up the garrison, and shouting that everyone else be damned. Thankfully, I don’t see any of these positions as a fair description of Hutchins or its faculty. They are working hard, delivering on their professional responsibilities, and, like many of us across the country, scratching their heads trying to make sense of just what our country wants out of higher education at the moment.

At the same time, I hope this moment of review and reflection can be used to coax the unit back to first principles of experiment, relevance, and innovation, in addition to the admirable defence they make of liberal learning, student autonomy, and conversation. In general, I see a university that very much wants the program to thrive, and, more importantly, recognizes Hutchins as a signature program in some ways key to both its history and its future. I think the courage that is required is to take SSU at its word and be willing to engage in dialogue about aspects of Hutchins’ work.

Non-Complex Interventions:

I can highlight a number of straightforward interventions that might be engaged and are rooted in observations from my visit and my experience managing at Hutchins-like program in a public university environment for 10 years:

- (1) alumni relations – One of the first casualties of an overworked faculty and director is the ability to maintain active relationships with alums and friends of the program. Hutchins has engaged the most familiar strategies at some point in its existence, but I’d encourage some shared responsibility – amongst the Director, the faculty, and the development office – to:
 - a. generate a comprehensive and well-kept database of program alumni
 - b. regularly invite alums to campus to deliver a named lecture and/or participate in career oriented seminars
 - c. build internship networks amongst alumni
 - d. establish an alumni leadership council with scholarship fundraising responsibilities
- (2) investigate opportunities to enhance office staff with work-study and other student workers. It’s key that the workspaces of programs like Hutchins be hives of activity. It communicates excitement, institutional investment, and local energy, and allows for continuous attention to the details of community outreach via management of social media, and conventional means of public relations like signage, flyers, brochures and the like.
- (3) assign a faculty member to the service responsibility of building student community. Ensure that an organizational council of Hutchins’ students has

institutional recognition, and look for long-term ways to secure physical space for students to gather informally – as Hutchins’ students and to promote a sense of cohesion.

- (4) work to ensure that Hutchins’ students are represented even *beyond* their proportion to the undergraduate population at SSU in university structures that highlight undergraduate research, study abroad, community engagement and service. Again, consider making it a specific faculty service assignment to gather and distribute information about student accomplishments to alumni stakeholders, and university news outlets.

Possible futures: Long Term Conversations and Considerations

My sense is that faculty are primarily concerned about maintaining a liberal arts delivery system that prioritizes intimate scale and the values/skills of critical thinking, life-long learning, and active citizenship. More than anything, they would like to continue as an identifiable community of full-time, tenured scholars, large enough to support their own personal growth, professional development and need for peer conversation and able to provide authentic and meaningful advising and mentorship relationships. They feel most at risk in an environment increasingly dominated by growth in contingent faculty and simultaneously pressured to deliver course content in larger and larger course environments.

I want to congratulate and praise the faculty for having already taken steps since the last review to take programmatic responsibility for general education delivery to non-Hutchins students and experiment with large enrolment classes. Such steps should earn the program real credibility from SSU administrators and demonstrate a willingness to assist with institutional bottlenecks and external accountability issues.

I see two sets of strategies as potentially enhancing of the program while protecting its key values and commitments. I think both pathways are viable and can be pursued with vigor after an active and collaborative set of reflections with all possible stakeholders. My key assumptions are that there is no reason to believe that the current resource environment is about to change or that there will not be further moves towards centralization in the California state system.

a. Strategies of consolidation building upon known strengths

Right now the Hutchins program accepts all-comers and perceives itself to be open to any student with a future interest in the teaching profession, any student with an interest in maximizing degree flexibility, or any student with an interest in a general liberal arts education on an intimate scale. Ironically then, one measure of programmatic success becomes a continuous growth curve, and a smaller more contingent faculty cohort must manage an ever-greater number of students. There is a specific institutional logic in play – significance and sustainability is to be measured according to the number of learners served – that may or may not serve SSU’s current needs.

I would encourage some conversation that investigates whether there is potentially more value-added to both Hutchins and SSU in a program model that centres not

endless growth but a high visibility, highly selective entry, pre-professional development program.

*I would highlight that while there are maybe 50-100 embedded experimental liberal arts programs in public university settings in the United States, **only Hutchins is so closely aligned with the production of teachers.*** It is surprising to me that more has not been made of this nice entanglement, philosophically, programmatically, and visually. There is an opportunity here to celebrate a distinctive path that aligns nicely with shared public concern about the production of citizen-teachers richly prepared to produce learners for the new workforce in the context of radical diversity.

I'd hope that investigation of this pathway – if nothing else – would stimulate two conversations: (a) the role of Track 1 to the ITDS option within the College of Arts and Sciences and (b) the need for substantive engagement between the College of Education and Hutchins faculty.

The first conversation, in terms of consolidation, might involve asking the question whether or not students conceptually invested in Track 1 might be better served and advised by the College, as a means of clarifying the meaning and identity of the program and streamlining workloads.

The second conversation is far more important I think and involves initiating on-going and continuous exchange with the College of Education as a partner. I could find few markers anywhere on the university, college or program websites that acknowledged an implicit contract or set of relationships between the programs. Students and some administrators acknowledged some muttering on the part of Education faculty about being uncertain or unknowledgeable of Hutchins learning outcomes, or, more aggressively, real scepticism about the value of the learning model as a pathway or preamble to professional certification. Regardless of whether or not his muttering ever hits some dangerous critical mass, it is a missed opportunity not to establish mechanisms by which the Hutchins faculty and the College of Education do not enter into continuous exchange about mutual and distinctive needs and concern.

Would Hutchins and SSU benefit by celebrating, supporting, and developing a program with a specific enrolment target and a challenging set of educational measures richly measured?

b. Strategies of entrepreneurial growth and forging new partnerships

A second set of strategies would focus on looking outwards in anticipation of new partnerships and roles for the program to play. Unlike the first strategy, it is more comfortable with significant growth but is more attentive to partnerships that are suggestive of new revenue streams, or simply position the program more effectively against other moves at the state level that would Hutchins unsustainable.

At other campuses with embedded, experimental programs, these partnerships have included:

- (a) identifying interdisciplinary degree structures at the undergraduate and graduate level that give the program a specific role to play in managing student learning and progress but mostly require the repackaging of current curricula across the campus environment into new and dynamic pathways
- (b) Identifying interdisciplinary degree opportunities that are true partnerships and involve faculty hiring, curriculum development, and targeted grant opportunities
- (c) Taking a more active role in conversations about degree completion needs and general education and declaring an openness to helping with curricula that assist students with accumulated credit hours from multiple institutions. Currently this work is done with special focus on adult, working students, but I think there is an opening to participate in a fuller conversation about SSU and 6 yr graduation rate that might pose questions about how Hutchins could be a key partner.

In the case of options (a) and (b), I think key is becoming an active partner in strategic conversations about the direction of the university as a whole and recognizing opportunities created by parallel developments. We have discovered on my own campus programs and departments (sometimes limited in new program development by specific disciplinary accreditation requirements) anxious to find an ambitious new partner with enough curricular flexibility

For instance, it seems likely that the continued development of the Green Music Centre will mean more undergraduates with an interest in the creative knowledge industries making their way to Sonoma as a matter of first choice. My own experience in Alabama has been that this cohort of students is little attracted by a conventional conservatory education and will have interest in combining work in digital media, theatre, communications, business, and the visual arts. Moreover, a cohort with a strong sense of vocation is often hesitant to embrace an open-ended liberal arts model even when such a model provides for more flexibility and personal growth. Sometimes it is important to shape flexible pathways that have the aura of substance and support of professional networks.

It strikes me that similar opportunities may exist in other intellectual and professional areas with strong ties to landscape, location, and economic growth: sustainability, global development, entrepreneurship, tourism, sport and recreation, new digital media, alternative education, and non-profit management.

Would Hutchins and SSU benefit from reshaping or expanding the program into a kind of curricular incubator and educational entrepreneur able to assist other units with new program development while extending their own liberal arts and liberal values footprint to fields otherwise more distinctly vocational in orientation?

A changing Sonoma state

I readily acknowledge that the pathways described – consolidation and/or growth – are contradictory and are so in acknowledgment that there are certain kinds of

knowledge that are just unavailable in a short site visit. It may be that the third option, i.e., do nothing – continuing on as is – is actually quite viable, but my strong instinct and reflection is to think that it is not. I worry that the heavy investment in pre-certification pathways without ongoing collaboration with the College of Education or careful attention to developments at the state level about the future of teacher training are very risky. I worry that this is not the moment for digging a moat and hoping to be left alone.

Remarkably, it strikes me that this is a moment not unlike Hutchins' original founding. Social upheaval, a reorientation of cultural attitudes towards higher education, and an openness to bold, transformative action should be familiar enough to those with long enough institutional memory.

It is exciting is that the intellectual capital and a rich body of pedagogical experience is already in place this time around. There is no question about the quality of instruction, the credibility of the basic course structures, the learning enthusiasm of the students, and the authentic character of the achievement. It is really just a matter of re-asking the kinds of questions that were asked in 1968 and reminding ourselves that those questions were asked in the spirit of the well-being of the whole – all of SSU, all of California, all of the potential students – and not just those who might find it convenient or attractive to opt for the transforming experience of talking about books with skilled teachers and engaged conversation partners.

The SSU community can be proud of everything the Hutchins faculty and students does. It's a remarkable concord of sensibility and grounded in sound pedagogical practice, openness to accountability measures, and sensitivity to student need. It's all delivered with passion and received with enthusiasm. I hope the SSU community as a whole can be convinced to continue to invest in its sustenance and well-being.