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## **Imbalances and Inequities: The Structure of Inquiry and Its Place in Rhetorical Studies**

When Vannevar Bush lobbied in the first half of the twentieth century to secure federal funding for academic science, he stressed that universities provided a needed order and structure to traditions of inquiry that by definition were vast and boundless. “Discoveries,” Bush explained, “come from remote and unexpected sources” (9). And universities, he argued, offered an organized advance into uncharted territories. Bush’s efforts contributed to what Christopher Newfield calls the “inquiry for all” model of public higher education, a commitment to provide on a mass scale the opportunity for students “to be exposed to both the *results* of advanced research and the *process* through which research creates new knowledge” (190-191).

In the twenty-first century, public funding for universities has declined even while a record number of U.S. residents now attend college. The challenge to serve more students with fewer resources has fueled a debate about the place of inquiry in higher education.<sup>1</sup> In a 2001 retrospective on his Godkin lectures, Clark Kerr expressed the concern that research has come at the expense of teaching. Kerr cautioned that when Bush championed the endless frontier of research, American universities enjoyed a prosperity they have been unable to sustain. John Hennessy, president of Stanford University, agreed. Financially speaking, he suggested, we have met the limits of the frontier. “[W]e are simply trying to support too many universities that are trying to be research institutions,” Hennessy told *The New Yorker* in 2013 (85). “Nationally,” he continued, “we may not be able to afford as many research institutions going forward” (85). Hennessy voiced a sentiment shared by twenty-three department chairs at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) who, in response to state funding cuts in 2009, proposed protecting research at UCSD, UC Berkeley, and UC Los Angeles by reducing research funding at other University of California campuses (Scull).<sup>2</sup> There is one of several restructuring

proposals recently advanced, others of which include dual-track hires for researchers and teachers, and partnerships that enable research universities to supply educational content to teaching institutions.<sup>3</sup>

The effort to restructure academic inquiry prompts revisiting its already contentious place in rhetorical studies. A restructuring of inquiry along the lines proposed above would introduce new issues into an old debate about the imbalance between rhetoric's academic, civic, and teaching traditions.<sup>4</sup> Any restructuring that further grew the institutional divide between research and teaching would pose unique problems for forms of inquiry like rhetorical criticism that have a pedagogical dimension. It would also, Newfield argues, limit to an elite few the number of faculty and student populations who could access inquiry processes and thus participate in knowledge production.<sup>5</sup> Even so, the proposals noted above may seem like opportunities to resolve philosophical concerns with the academic turn in rhetorical studies, or the turn toward academic professionalism that modeled the study of rhetoric after the social sciences. That is to say, the restructuring of research underway at the systemic level may appear to address the concern that the study of rhetoric has become imbalanced in favor of theoretical and critical inquiry.

Many have lamented rhetoric's turn toward theory and criticism and questioned the professionalization of rhetorical studies that accompanied it.<sup>6</sup> Like Kerr, critics believe that the rise of rhetoric as a subject of academic research has come at the expense of rhetoric's civic and teaching traditions. Gerard A. Hauser, for instance, argues that rhetoric's academic turn "sanitized its subject," giving greater priority to inquiries into rhetoric than to education in the rhetorical arts (41). So subordinated to research have rhetoric's teaching traditions become, he adds, that Rhetoric and Composition can only "legitimize its attention to teaching" by producing

scholarship on teaching and learning (41).<sup>7</sup> David Fleming notes that rhetorical studies has divided structurally as well as philosophically.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of its academic turn, he explains, rhetoric took up residence “at the two extremes of higher education:” in first-year composition and public speaking courses and in multi-year graduate programs, an arrangement that institutionalized the imbalance between rhetoric’s traditions (173).

Critics fear that these philosophical and structural arrangements have rendered rhetorical studies inconsequential. E. Johanna Hartelius argues that rhetorical education loses its “relevance to society” when the curriculum “is predominantly geared toward criticism,” rather than civic education, which is “grounded quite concretely in the experiences of social, political, and economic reality” (170–71). Robert Danisch agrees. In a rejoinder to Stanley Fish, he contends that the “goals of the modern research university” do not align with the virtues of democratic participation (410). When inquiry is synonymous with deconstruction and prioritized over rhetoric’s civic tradition, he argues, we forfeit the study of practical techniques for deliberating our collective affairs (419).<sup>9</sup>

While they question the direction that rhetorical studies has taken, critics of rhetoric’s academic turn do not necessarily support the kind of consolidation of inquiry that Hennessy and others propose. Fleming, Hartelius, and Danisch, for instance, advocate integrated models of rhetorical study, such as a multiform curriculum (Fleming), a civic-minded pedagogy of invention (Hartelius), or a “robust project for the practical use of language” (Danisch 411). Further isolating research from teaching would hinder these initiatives, or any program of study where the aim of rhetorical criticism is, as Robert E. Terrill describes it, to furnish “resources for our own critical rhetorical invention” and “to continue collectively to advance the practice of our art” (695).

Despite having different objectives, the effort to balance rhetoric's traditions is at risk of becoming entangled in the inequitable consolidation of inquiry currently underway. When Bush sought funding for academic research, he argued that inquiry needed the structure that universities could provide. To reimagine inquiry's place in rhetorical studies without also restricting access to it requires that we likewise advocate both the practice of critical reflection *and the institutions and professional conventions that sustain it*. In this essay I argue that the generic, administrative aspects of academic inquiry, such as the granting of degrees, lend a needed structure to the study of rhetoric and to rhetorical invention. Were we to locate the value of inquiry in the university's structural support, we might see it as more humble than careerist, more sustaining than debunking, and more invested than indifferent. In what follows, I trace a correspondence between those qualities, generative theories of rhetorical invention, and the conventions of academic professionalism to show how inquiry shares rhetoric's commitment to unspecified possibility. When seen from that perspective, the problem with inquiry's place in the study of rhetoric does not stem from an imbalance between its traditions. The problem lies with inequities in higher education that limit access to the structural support for inquiry that universities supply. One way to balance research with rhetoric's civic and pedagogical traditions is to address those inequities, and rather than allowing them to widen, to democratize inquiry across both institutions and fields of study.

Academic inquiry is a collective, sprawling enterprise: an endless exercise in study, argument, and review that tilts toward openness if only by failing to ever complete itself. It has become commonplace to disparage academic work and the proliferation of scholarship that few read or understand.<sup>10</sup> Yet that perpetual frustration with inquiry attests to how daunting and challenging it is to meet with unspecified possibility much less scout its prospects. Any

coherency academia has is due in large part to university infrastructure and convention. That structure, like the deliberative techniques to which Danisch refers, has a navigational function. It enables us to court uncertainty and sustain the conditions of possibility that invention requires.

While much has been written about the commonalities between rhetorical invention and inquiry, less has been said about how the generic, professional aspects of academic inquiry serve inventive processes.<sup>11</sup> I explore that correspondence through a close reading of *Naturally Obsessed: The Making of a Scientist*, a 2009 film notable for being the only documentary on graduate student life. Streamed for free online, the fifty-six minute film documents three years in the lives of graduate students Kilpatrick Carroll, Gabe Cubberly, and Robert Townley while they train under Lawrence Shapiro in a molecular biology lab at Columbia University Medical Center. Created to address declining support for doctoral education in the sciences and to attract prospective students to academic careers, the film provides a detailed study of the role academic infrastructure and professionalism play in inquiry processes. Engaged in research with no clear trajectory and remote ends, the subjects of the film struggle with the uncertainties that fuel scientific inquiry and the impermanency of its yield. To manage their frustration and disappointment, students make sense of the inquiry process in terms of steps toward a diploma, publications, and other professional goals. That generic infrastructure—common across fields of study—enable Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley to sustain the unspecified possibilities of their research and weather the failures it incurs. Their stories provide a sense of how those same institutional conventions serve the study of rhetoric, which, likewise, challenges us to come to terms with the uncertainty and impermanency of symbolic action.

Before turning to the film, I survey generative theories of rhetorical invention that conceptualize it as something akin to academic inquiry. Throughout the literature on rhetorical

invention, it and inquiry often appear analogous.<sup>12</sup> Generative theories of invention extend that analogy but are notable for the way they present unspecified possibility as key to rhetorical action. I also revisit Richard Lanham's essay on the rhetorical *paideia* (1986) and Stanley Fish's early writings on academia collected in *Doing What Comes Naturally* (1989). The invention/inquiry analogy often serves as an argument on behalf of rhetorical invention and its role in inquiry. Lanham and Fish reverse that argument to advocate on behalf of academia and to defend academic professionalism as a rhetorical virtue. Like generative theories of rhetorical invention, Lanham and Fish celebrate academic inquiry as a commitment to unspecified possibility. They do not, however, elaborate on how academic structures help us to manage those possibilities. For the subjects of *Naturally Obsessed*, the idea that their research could take an endless number of paths is less a cause for celebration than it is a source of anxiety. The film reveals how Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley use the generic structure that universities supply to help them dwell in uncertainty, a state of being that proves difficult to sustain long term, particularly in the face of personal and professional setbacks. As a study of the mundane, generic details of academic inquiry, the film provides a glimpse of how the university sustains the kind of indefinite processes required of molecular biology and rhetorical invention alike.

### **Inquiry and invention**

Something of Bush's frontier spirit animates a 1971 Speech Communication Association (SCA) report on rhetorical invention, which borrows from the sciences a definition of invention as "a productive human thrust into the unknown" (229).<sup>13</sup> Academic inquiry serves rhetorical invention, the committee suggests, by acting as a placeholder for the unknown. The committee's notion of invention departs from more civic-minded, pragmatic notions such as the one Hartelius

seeks to revive. It departs, too, from the popular conception of the university as merely a simulated environment in which to train in rhetorical strategies. For a point of comparison, consider Hartelius's definition of invention (drawn from Giambattista Vico). Invention, she argues, is a practical response to an existing exigency or "concrete need" (162). The constraints imposed by academic research create artificial exigencies that motivate inventive solutions to actual problems. But, she adds, academia's disciplinary silos and professional dictates are not conducive to the ambiguity and freedom that rhetorical invention requires. In contrast, the SCA committee argues that invention is "not a product of necessity" but an endless process of generation marked by moments of coming-to-be, nourishment, evolution, and replacement (229–30). Interested in supplementing this generative process, they theorize that invention always "takes place" within a worldview, and they propose that inquiry plays a role in invention by serving as "'places for the places'" (234). Like Bush, the committee locates the value of academic inquiry in the structural support that universities provide. That argument finds academic institutions playing a role in rhetorical processes beyond that of serving as practice spaces.

The committee's argument anticipates more recent theories of rhetorical invention that, likewise, locate its value in the unspecified possibility it retains rather than the specific responses to situations it generates. As theorized by John Muckelbauer, William Trapani, and Barbara Biesecker, rhetorical invention resembles inquiry in its endless, cyclical processes and in the uncertainty it courts. Muckelbauer characterizes invention as a perpetual "relay" that cycles through the familiar, repeating it each time "with a difference" (43; 146). Trapani describes invention as speech "*á propos*" any number of unanticipated "moments to come" and distinguishable by its lack of "assurance of destination or success" (337). In her study of Kenneth



Burke, Biesecker first defines rhetoric as “discourse whose continued ‘existence’ is predicated upon its own perpetual failure or...inability to achieve its end” (99). She then goes on to say that rhetorical invention does not “determine the particular constitution, character, or disposition” of selves or societies, but only maintains the conditions for possibility (101). All three locate the power of rhetorical invention in its incompleteness, a perspective that neither confines rhetoric to a well-defined civic tradition nor equates it with all of discourse.<sup>14</sup> In appreciating rhetoric’s commitment to unspecified possibility, these theories recognize, as Muckelbauer explains, that, “the determination of that which is proper to rhetoric cannot be presumed in advance” (141).<sup>15</sup> It is possible to imagine how an art of rhetoric based on that presumption might benefit from both the open-ended uncertainties of inquiry and from the structure that universities supply. Like rhetoric, inquiry relies on its inability to achieve its own ends. Its permanent incompleteness holds out indefinitely for unanticipated moments to come. And the academic convention of citation, recitation, and peer review is like an institutionalized form of Muckelbauer’s inventive relay.

With these resemblances between inquiry and invention in mind, Lanham and Fish’s arguments on behalf of the rhetorical academic read less as theories of rhetoric or a rhetorical theory of the human condition than as promotion for academia and its inventive capacities. Academic inquiry is “a way of life,” Lanham declares, “as well as a course of study” (132). When they wrote in defense of academia, Lanham and Fish were responding to criticisms then issuing from within and beyond the academy against the cultural turn in literary studies and the professionalism that accompanied it. Critics faulted that turn for the rise in theory-laden, esoteric scholarship “written in a prose,” Lanham quips, “that is hard to read without an anesthetic” and is “intelligible,” Fish affirms, “only within the assumptions embodied in current professional

practices” (Lanham 137; Fish 206). Regardless, they argue, academia’s worth is also rhetoric’s: both are endless gestures toward unspecified possibility. We should take it as a sign of our professional health, Fish tell us, when we see no end of dissertations on the same topic (203).

In an echo of the SCA committee, Lanham and Fish suggest that academic inquiry courts the unknown. Academic professionalism, or gamesmanship (which Lanham argues animates *homo sapiens* at a cellular level), enables our capacity to navigate possibility (134). As such, they find academia’s professional codes no more or less superficial than those governing the law (Fish) or Wall Street (Lanham) and as susceptible to fashion and trends. Indeed, this “anti-[academic] professionalism,” Fish warns, is nothing more than “an up-to-date, twentieth-century form of the traditional hostility to rhetoric” (219). In defense of professionalism, they argue that the rhetorical academic rightfully avoids closure, pursues knowledge for the sake of knowing, and engages in what Lanham refers to as “vacuum behavior” or “things we like to do just for the hell of it” (135). The pursuit of degrees and publications, or what Lanham calls status seeking, enables academics to grapple with the “irreducibly grubby” practicalities of research (137).

Though they mean to advocate on behalf of academia (and rhetoric’s place in it), Lanham and Fish’s celebration of the rhetorical academic nevertheless glosses over the challenges of inquisitive invention. And while it is clear from their arguments how rhetoric animates the academy, it is less clear how academic structures and professionalism in turn serve the study of rhetoric. According to Lanham and Fish, one need only possess a rhetorical sensibility to appreciate the inventive value of inquiry. However, given the complexities of the inquiry process and the uncertainties it incurs, its value often seems remote and thin. In contrast, the stories in *Naturally Obsessed* depict the time, stamina, patience, and expense that inquiry requires and suggest how difficult it can be to sustain enthusiasm for unspecified possibility. By focusing on

how the generic conventions of academia structure the inquiry process, the film illustrates the importance of having institutional support in addition to the rhetorical sensibility that Lanham and Fish promote.

*The conventions of invention*

*Naturally Obsessed* fills in the dull and dreary details of academic inquiry where Lanham and Fish's celebration leaves off. Bypassing the specialized training that research in molecular biology requires, the film focuses on the challenge of managing the uncertainties, possibilities, and failures of scientific research and of accepting the impermanency of success. The role professional conventions play in that process becomes apparent over the course of the film. Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley exhibit the virtues of the rhetorical academic Lanham and Fish promote. They profess a love of knowledge for the sake of knowledge and a willingness to do research just for the hell of it. Nevertheless, they struggle to engage with unspecified possibility and to commit to research without assurance of what it will yield. The pursuit of degrees, publications, and other professional goals provide structural support for processes that are otherwise open-ended.

From a cynical perspective, the students' struggles to accept the indefinite nature of academic research could be taken as evidence of the emptiness of academia and of an institution too absorbed in its own superficial conventions to recognize its insignificance. Having little to say about academic labor conditions or the impact of research on other social spheres, the film lends itself to such an argument. In this essay, I read their stories as an illustration of how difficult it is to come to terms with uncertainty or the possibilities that accompany it. As an encounter with unspecified possibility, the study of molecular biology shares something with the study of rhetoric. In the case of rhetoric, inquiry proceeds without the benefit of a definitive

domain or agreement on the objects proper to it. But the value of the university's infrastructure is the same in either case: it enables us to withstand uncertainty and impermanency.

### **How to be an academic scientist**

We might expect a film about academic science to emphasize the importance of objectivity and logic. *Naturally Obsessed* instead suggests that science is about remaining open to possibilities and accepting the uncertainties of research. In its opening scene, the film foregrounds those uncertainties and the problems they present. Over images of oscillating liquids and coded beakers, a voice describes the project underway in Lawrence Shapiro's laboratory and the difficulty of facing questions without clear answers.

Our current research is on AMPK, a protein molecule that controls the burning and storage of fat and that may play a role in obesity and diabetes. We're trying to figure out what AMPK looks like and how it controls metabolism. Since protein molecules are so small, you have to pack millions of them together to form a crystal. Then we can examine the crystals using x-rays from a giant x-ray generator called a synchrotron. The pattern of spots produced by the bending or diffraction of the x-rays when they strike the atoms in the crystal produces the data we're looking for. *Everything is unknown. There is no recipe.* So it's a really tough thing to do. (4:58)

Shapiro and his graduate students bear little resemblance to the scientists of popular imagination. To make any headway in studying AMPK, they rely on creativity and work without guidelines. As one student remarks in regards to their approach, "there doesn't seem to be much logic in it" (6:18). To illustrate by example, he shares a story about another lab working on the same problem that could not get the proteins to crystallize. "So they added pickle juice to the drops,"

he explains, “from the ‘Sweet and Snappy Vlasic brand’” (6:30). His story underscores the problem of inquiry. “You just have to try everything,” he concludes (6:42). Another student adds that, “you can try a thousand different things and a thousand different people have a thousand different ways for you to do it, but none of them is guaranteed to work. And in the end no matter what you’re doing...it’s possible that it’s an intractable problem and it will never work” (10:05). The interpretive resources that accompany the film echo this message. A viewer in a post-screening discussion remarks: “I think people are turned off from science because they don’t see the creativity in it, and that’s what intrigues me the most about science: the freedom and creativity to explore” (“Students and Scientists Dialogue” 2).

The film suggests that creativity proves useful not only for entertaining endless possible lines of inquiry, but also for accepting the uncertainties of the research process. Shapiro models this for his students by describing the whimsical ritual he has for crystal diffraction. As he explains, everyone has a ritual.

Some people have little Voodoo dolls that they put in the crystallization room because, who knows what’s going to happen, right? It’s out of your hands. It’s out of your control. But I’ve noticed that if you mount crystals while you’re listening to a particular piece of music, in fact, called ‘Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots’ from the Flaming Lips, then the crystals tend to diffract (19:00).

When Carroll produces a promising crystal, he and Shapiro drive to the synchrotron facility to diffract it. The Flaming Lips play in the background. But the crystals fail to diffract, underscoring the indefinite nature of their task.

If Carroll’s experience yields few insights into protein crystallization, it provides a stark example of the uncertainties that accompany scientific research. Driving back from the

synchrotron, Carroll's disappointment is evident and he searches for a lesson to salvage the moment. The lesson he draws is not about the diffraction process, but about the seduction of success. "It's all about failure," he says to Shapiro. "I mean, you learn so much from failure. And you learn almost nothing from success, right?" (21:50). The setback is considerable. Carroll will need to start back at the beginning to form another protein crystal, a process that could take years.

*Learning to do research just for the hell of it*

Carroll's failure at the synchrotron illustrates how science requires more than a specialized knowledge of one's field. Scientific inquiry in general, Shapiro explains, "is very unstructured" (10:40). As important as the science is the academic professionalization that structures the research process. Throughout the film, Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley struggle to defer success indefinitely and to manage the uncertainties of their research. Townley explains: "It's not easy to do this day after day and fail day after day. It took me two and half years of doing experiments and having them not work before I got my first crystal" (14:08).

With successes few and far between and several degrees of separation between their research and its practical applications, Shapiro's students sustain their enthusiasm by cultivating the virtues of Lanham and Fish's rhetorical academic: pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge and "vacuum behavior." Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley meet their day-to-day slog through crystallization trials with a love for knowledge and the research process. "What gets me to work everyday," Cubberly shares, "is that maybe today I'll have the answer to this question. And then I'll have more questions that I'll be able to ask" (1:07). Cubberly continues: "What's exciting is just the grand picture; it's the big ideas. The possibilities are endless. You know, as a graduate student, all we have is data. That's it, you know. All we have are these experiments, so

you might as well get excited about them” (7:09). Carroll echoes her sentiments: “What do I say to someone who is like, ‘why are you doing this?’ I say, because it’s interesting” (6:53).

Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley seem at first to exemplify Lanham and Fish’s academic ethos, but it becomes clear over the course of the film that each find it challenging to stay motivated by the prospect of endless possibilities. When they find that the energy and enthusiasm needed to sustain research flows unevenly, they question whether academic science is really for them. Early in the film, for instance, Carroll is confident that pursuing a doctorate in molecular biology is worth sacrificing more lucrative pursuits. For him, the appeal lies in the degree itself.

There are lots of people who come here who probably could have done other things and made a lot more money. In fact, I’m sure of it. We talk about it frequently and complain to each other about how we could be making two or three hundred thousand dollars on Wall Street. But, I couldn’t be happier, right? Like, I wake up; I do something I love; at the end of four, five, six years here I end up with a Ph.D. from Columbia. What could be better than that? (18:11)

Later, his confidence falters. He begins to question whether he is willing to forego other life achievements, such as family and financial security, in pursuit of academic ones: “I have a life outside of grad school and being a student here and making \$24,000 a year is not conducive to us moving up in the world and having a family and all the different things that I want to accomplish later in life” (31:45). Cubberly, too, agonizes over quitting graduate school, but struggles with the prospect of losing her academic identity. She discusses the dilemma with her lab mates: “You can kind of, like, decide not to go to grad school and that’s a legitimate decision if you find a job making lots of money. Why not, right? Ph.D, shmee H.D. But from our perspective, if we leave,

we're quitters. There's no stepping back once you've started" (34:55). Townley's wife Claire de la Cova, also a graduate student, elaborates: "You reach the point when [pursuing a doctorate is] a lot harder than you expected and you want to just let go; fall; stop; but you can't, because," she pauses before continuing, "there are so many reasons why you can't and you have to sort of gather that extra little bit of energy and kind of get through the tough part" (15:45). Even Townley, who seems unwavering in his enthusiasm, struggles at points with doubt. When Carroll shares with Townley that he has crystals to take to the synchrotron, Townley extends him well wishes: "Cool, good luck, man" before adding with some anxiety "the race is on, and I'm behind" (18:40).

These doubts and fears speak to the personal investment, commitment, and humility it takes to accept the uncertainties and pursue the possibilities that inquiry discloses. Were Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley working in a different field of study, they might also be discouraged by the idea that their research has no "immediate" or "practical" application. As it is, they are involved in research that may eventually contribute to the treatment of diabetes. Nevertheless, their research applies to one small piece of a larger, distant problem, and in that sense it, like rhetorical invention, addresses moments yet to come. They will not oversee that treatment, nor is it likely they will personally profit from it due to the division Columbia University maintains between its academic research (housed within Columbia University Medical Center) and its industry partnerships (managed by Columbia Technology Ventures). Still, their anxiety is not an existential crisis over the value of "high" theory or "pure" research; it is a struggle to be patient with the unknowns of the research process.

Their doubts and fears give voice to the unsettling and exhausting experience of managing the millions of minute gestures required to sustain an encounter with unspecified



possibility. They are cycling through Muckelbauer's inventive relay, covering the same ground with each loop in hopes of surfacing something different. Invention, no matter its prospects, is tedious and time consuming. Considered in this context, Lanham's comment about academia being a way of life takes on some weight. Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley are not mastering a sensibility so much as devoting their own lives to maintaining conditions of possibility. "Getting a Ph.D. is two thousand days," Townley says of his experience of graduate school (15:45).

*The impermanency of success*

To manage the uncertainties of inquiry and lend structure to the process, Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley look to diplomas, publications, and academic titles—the professional aspects of academia that critics characterize as most superficial. Those institutional conventions sustain Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley in their engagement with unspecified possibility. With little indication of where they are in their research, the students orient themselves by measuring progress made toward graduation or a publication. In one scene, we see a clip from Townley's video laboratory journal in which he explains the significance of his present task in terms of a step toward graduation. "I checked the website today and nobody published the crystal construction I'm after," he says. "And now I'm going to start the million-dollar experiment: bacterial strain 790 [holds a frozen plastic container up to the camera]. This is the one I'm going to graduate with" (8:17). While in the middle of another procedure, he jokes with Carroll: "Kil, this is the last plasmas I'm going to make as a graduate student." [laughs] "How many times have I said that?" (14:42). In a similar way, Carroll manages the uncertainties of his research by thinking in terms of publications, which offer an anchor in the sea of inquiry. "What makes us patient," he explains, "is that the proteins that we're working on, they will be big. This could be a

tier-one journal. And that can make or break a career. If you come out of graduate school with a *Science* or *Nature* paper, it just opens doors for you” (22:07).

An investment in academic convention is the very trait Lanham and Fish champion. Writing in defense of the rhetorical academic, Lanham and Fish point to professional titles and publications as signs of a rhetorical force at work. The university’s manufactured directives are acting on and through us, Fish argues, even if we do not recognize their influence. He goes on to suggest that, like Wily E. Coyote, we must believe that we are running on something more substantive: “The professional who is ‘spoken’ in his every thought and action by the institution and yet ‘speaks’ in the name of essences that transcend the institution...is not acting out a contradiction, but simply acting in the only way human beings can” (246). Fish’s conclusion casts the rhetorical aspects of academia as unremarkable and ultimately no different from those of any other institution. It is due to our human condition that academics engage in gamesmanship, status seeking, and inventive play.

Like Lanham and Fish, *Naturally Obsessed* takes seriously the institutional and professional particulars of academic life. The film focuses on those aspects to such a degree that the inquiry process appears to consist of nothing else. A number of opportunities present themselves where appeal to a “higher” purpose might be made, but the film never takes them. It does not provide any detail, for instance, of Shapiro’s scientific accomplishments; it focuses instead on his life as a scientist. And when Townley’s research generates findings, the film presents the event as an academic milestone rather than a medical breakthrough. These scenes suggest that the integrity of their work stems from their commitment to the virtues of inquiry itself and not the accumulation of knowledge or advances in medicine.

One might suppose the film's resolute focus on academic convention would evacuate research of any substance. Yet, in a counter to Fish's argument, the film explores how the academic life sustains open-ended inquiry processes and we see inquiry made substantive as a life's work. Lanham and Fish see the rhetorical condition at work in academia, evidenced by the institution's investment in titles and other professional conventions. While they acknowledge the organizing function of that symbolic order, they do not specify its role in inquiry beyond that of status seeking. *Naturally Obsessed* provides a better sense of the practical need for conventions that can be used to chart paths through open-ended inquiries. Carroll, Cubberly, Townley, and Shapiro's individual stories illustrate that link. Their personal encounters with the indeterminate and their struggles to inhabit a process without destination speak to the institutional structure inquiry requires.

A personal story that Shapiro relates illustrates the organizational function of academic convention and how that function itself, and not the prospect of answers or knowledge, affords inquiry its substance. The story is about his first publication in the scientific journal *Nature*. It is also a story about the death of his father. As Townley does with his lab procedures ("this is the one I'm going to graduate with"), Shapiro makes his father's death intelligible by speaking about it in terms of this professional milestone:

My first *Nature* paper; you know, that's your first great thing; my first great thing in science. And I hadn't spoken to my father for a long time, who is a surgeon, so he understood science to some degree, or at least success in science. And I kind of avoided talking to him for about a year before, probably because I knew I would have this and I could kind of see him and say, 'look, well you see I'm doing okay now; things are good.' And, then, believe it or not, on the very day that my paper was published in *Nature*, he

died. The morning; the same morning. It's like an unbelievable, cruel joke, I think March 23, 1995. I think. So, I never got to taste the triumph you expect from having great things really work out (22:22).

Shapiro's academic virtuosity is evidenced here not by his contributions to the health sciences, but in the way his father's death and his publication in *Nature* exist side-by-side, neither one diminished by the other. (Does he remember the date because of the death or because of the publication?) Success and failure make important appearances in the story. His father, he tells us, understands success in science if perhaps not science itself, a point that foreshadows his conclusion: being a scientist involves more than meeting with success. As we have learned from the film, it also involves coming to terms with failure. With that lesson in mind, it is unclear whether Shapiro's final comment about never tasting triumph is a lament about his life, a statement about what makes him a good scientist, or both.

The story tells us little about the financial, practical, or political value of Shapiro's research. It conveys a great deal, though, about committing one's self to a life of inquiry. Here it means that alive and published, dead and unacknowledged occur together simultaneously: the same mourning. If the story tells us something of the personal investment required to be an academic, it speaks also of the extent to which the impermanency of individual lives serve as the conditions for the indefinite pursuit of possibilities.

Townley's story provides another lesson in the impermanency that accompanies the inquiry process, and the ways in which academic conventions supply a means of traversing the impermanent without disavowing it. The film's final chapter focuses on Townley after he successfully diffracts the AMPK protein and analyzes part of its structure. In a voiceover, Shapiro explains the significance of this accomplishment. Notably, he locates it not in the

medical benefits that may result, but as one singular occasion in an on-going research process. “We have these moments,” he says, “when we discover things about nature and we understand something really eternal that nobody else has understood” (47:45). And then, the inquiry process begins again. Though they provide a brief summary of his findings, neither Townley nor Shapiro entertains its practical uses. Instead, the film marks Townley’s success with a shot of the publication that results from his work: an essay in the journal *Science* dated March 23, 2007, twelve years to the day after Shapiro’s first publication. That and Townley’s graduation party are the only material evidence of the yields of his research. The final scene of the film, Townley’s party, takes place on the laboratory’s rooftop patio. His colleagues (many of them still in lab coats) have covered tables with plastic sheets, set out food, and chilled champagne. Arriving after his thesis defense, Townley dons a graduation gown, opens a bottle, and toasts his new academic title: “I’m a doctor now” (52:48).

The celebration, Townley’s gown, his utterance all exemplify the constitutive power of style and play that Lanham and Fish attribute to rhetoric. Lanham and Fish might read the gown and Townley’s new title as evidence of the rhetorical dimension of human affairs and the importance of status symbols. From that perspective, the party seems modest compared to the long years of work it celebrates. But its modesty should not be mistaken for the superficiality that so many wish to assign to academic achievement.

The makeshift, thrown-together quality of the affair offers the more interesting insight into the importance of the structural support that universities provide inquiry processes. It is, fittingly, a fleeting occasion. Meant to recognize a transition (not a conclusion), it is another example of how conventions such as publications and diplomas help to manage the strange, always unfinished process of pursuing unspecified possibilities. As it marks a milestone, the

party reminds viewers of the impermanency of success: failure's companion and the fuel for invention.

### **Supporting rhetorical inquiry**

Protein crystallization is not critical reflection. Rhetorical studies is not molecular biology. The former does not require giant x-ray machines. The latter sees the rare reference to Aristotle. They are different, yet each has a significant contribution to make to our daily lives and social affairs. And uncertainty and impermanency play central roles in both. The stories in *Naturally Obsessed* provide a sense of how the university's generic infrastructure and its professional conventions provide a means of coming to terms with uncertainty and impermanency so as to engage with possibility. Those same structures benefit the study of rhetoric, particularly its inventive aspects. In both cases, academic conventions support the daunting task of entertaining unspecified possibility and sustain the slow, repetitive, unstable work required to invent responses to situations we can never fully anticipate.

When we equate inquiry with the research it generates, it can seem turgid and vacuous. Criticism, for instance, is often faulted for engaging in debate for the sake of debate. Where it is synonymous with debunking, it appears mired in what Muckelbauer calls the "dynamics of negation and refusal" (11). In my reading of *Naturally Obsessed*, I have highlighted ways in which academic conventions grant inquiry weight and importance by supporting the time, effort, and expense required to investigate possibilities. In doing so, academic inquiry marks a commitment to invention understood in its broadest sense as the possibility of something else. Rhetorical studies shares that commitment and benefits from it. Its critical elements, exemplified

in rhetorical inquiry, refuse to accept as permanent even the most calcified discourse. In that sense, rhetoric, too, holds out for the possibility of something else.

In defending the generic aspects of inquiry, my objective here is to re-orient the debate over inquiry's place in rhetorical studies so that we address the growing structural inequities across institutions of higher education and fields of study. Hauser, Hartelius, and Danisch express concern that inquiry (particularly forms of hermeneutics and deconstruction geared toward academic publication) comes at the expense of rhetoric's other traditions. They propose recalibrating inquiry to bring rhetoric's academic investments in balance with its tradition as a pragmatic art. If inquiry is to have any meaningful place in the study of rhetoric, however, it will need the kind of structural support that universities can provide, and it will need that support distributed equitably. Rhetorical studies does not need a synchrotron, but it does require a few institutional resources. If rhetoric is to be impactful, rhetorical invention cannot become the purview of an elite few.

The problem lies in the imbalances and inequities that manifest in every register of higher education. The institutional trend toward consolidation of research raises doubts about whether rhetorical inquiry (in any form) has a future. As Fleming has noted, the imbalance lies not just between rhetoric's academic and civic traditions but also in the educational divide that sees undergraduates passing quickly through composition and public speaking classes, while extended inquiry is reserved for graduate students and faculty. That structure reflects the imbalance in how we weight research and teaching and how we weight inquiry's place in different levels of rhetorical education. It is also reflective of rhetoric's diminished place in the university.

In addition to imbalances within rhetorical studies, there are inequities across fields of study. One example of this is institutional support enjoyed by molecular biology as compared to rhetorical studies. The university model that privileges what Elizabeth Popp Berman calls academic-science-as-economic-engine (which she distinguishes from an older model of science-as-economic-resource) fuels the inequity between the sciences and the humanities that manifests in everything from priority in the curriculum to academic labor conditions.<sup>16</sup> The effort underway to consolidate inquiry to fewer institutions and restrict access to the infrastructure that supports research, a trend that is uneven across fields of study and even within fields of study, will exacerbate the inequities that already exist.<sup>17</sup> Consider, for instance, that while *Naturally Obsessed* was made to address declining support for doctoral education in the sciences, pharmaceutical giant Merck Corporation underwrote the film. Carroll, Cubberly, and Townley may experience their research as remote and removed, but they need not worry that non-academics will fail to appreciate its contributions or the labor and laboratory facilities it requires. The same cannot be said for rhetorical studies, a situation that calls for collaboration between those inclined to find fault with rhetoric's academic tradition and those inclined to defend it.

When Lanham argued on behalf of a rhetorical *paideia*—an extended, cross-disciplinary curriculum unified by rhetoric—he was arguing in a way for greater structural support for rhetorical studies. The question is whether realizing that support is an either/or proposition for inquiry. Must greater support for rhetorical education mean less rhetorical inquiry? Perhaps the problem is not too much inquiry, as Hennessy suggests, but the inequitable distribution of resources. Reserving inquiry for fewer institutions and fewer fields of study would reduce the faculty and student populations who have the opportunity to sustain an encounter with unspecified possibility and see what it can yield. In the case of rhetorical inquiry, more is at stake



than the chance for personal edification. Any rhetorical project that hopes to intervene in and shape sociopolitical affairs needs practitioners who appreciate and can navigate the uncertainties and impermanency of invention. To dismiss academic convention as superficial is to discount the collective deliberation and patience that invention calls for, the labor it requires, and the institutional commitment needed to craft impermanent responses to the many unimaginable rhetorical situations yet to come.

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<sup>1</sup> A 2011 report from Harvard's Graduate School of Education makes the case against the "assumption...that an academic, classroom-based approach is capable of preparing nearly all adolescents and young adults for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (9).

<sup>2</sup> In a letter addressed to the University of California Office of the President, the Chairs argued that "rather than destroying the distinctiveness and excellence at Berkeley, UCLA, and UCSD... we propose that you urge the President and Regents to acknowledge that UC [Santa Cruz], [UC Riverside], UC Merced are in substantial measure teaching institutions."

<sup>3</sup> Adam Grant details a plan for dual tenure tracks and Heller gives details of current institutional partnerships.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term "academic" here and throughout this essay to refer to the contemplative modes of rhetorical studies, and to common professional practices such as publication of research.

<sup>5</sup> Louise Wetherbee Phelps adds that recent changes in higher education have unfolded unevenly across institutions with "some schools, regions, and disciplines [having] suffered keenly from deteriorating conditions and attitudes toward higher education" while others are "able to ignore such forces or treat them as only temporary or localized" (66).

<sup>6</sup> William L. Nothstine, *et al.* give one account of the professionalization of rhetorical studies, or what they call "the scientizing of criticism." Professionalism, they argue, subjected rhetorical criticism to the values of science, or a "preoccupation with theory building, the cult of objectivity, reliance upon method for confirmation and falsification of claims, and even the ideal of progress" (31). Robert Hariman also argued that professionalism subjected rhetoric to the culture of expertise. Disciplinary boundaries, for instance, compromise a rhetorical project that Hariman describes as a "meditation upon the pretensions, limitations, and discontinuities of knowledge" (227).

<sup>7</sup> Hauser goes on to say that we have severed rhetoric's connection to civic education and lost a sense of the "role of rhetoric in our lives as citizens and social actors" (42).

<sup>8</sup> Dilip Gaonkar (1990) made a similar argument about rhetoric's diminished "institutionalized presence." The more rhetoric became synonymous with language use and social action, he argued, the smaller and less relevant became its institutional domain. "[I]t would appear," he observed, "that an institutionalized presence of rhetoric is neither necessary nor sufficient for the rhetorical turn" (362).

<sup>9</sup> A sentiment shared by Arabella Lyon who argues that rhetoric's academic turn "diminished the place of rhetoric as an action in the world" (36).

<sup>10</sup> See for example the anonymous blog "100 reasons NOT to go to graduate school," posting #89: "virtually no one reads what you write," (March 25, 2013): <http://100rsns.blogspot.com/2013/03/89-virtually-no-one-reads-what-you-write.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Some argue, for instance, that inquiry in the form of critical reflection helps to identify and organize possibility. Gordon Rohman and Albert Wlecke's work on "prewriting" marks the beginning of an extensive discussion of this idea in the area of Rhetoric and Composition. Other examples include arguments by Kirscht, *et al.* (1994) on how disciplinary conventions structure critical, exploratory processes, and Herbert W. Simons' description of inquiry as the "art of arraying and comparing ideas" (21).

<sup>12</sup> Janice M. Lauer's history of rhetorical invention shows the diverse ways in which that analogy animates rhetorical studies. See also Karen LeFevre who theorizes rhetorical invention as "a search for wisdom" (2). Roderick P. Hart, likewise, sees rhetorical invention in the "wandering" that constitutes the start of new research.<sup>12</sup> In another

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turn of the analogy, Phelps advocates what she calls institutional invention in higher education and suggests that we rethink “creativity as a more democratic and distributed value” (87).

<sup>13</sup> The report summarized the proceedings of the 1970 National Conference on Rhetoric, the second of two meetings held as part of The National Developmental Project on Rhetoric sponsored by The SCA and supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

<sup>14</sup> In his critique of rhetoric’s academic turn, Gaonkar (1997) cautioned that endless studies in the rhetoric of X flatten it into an unremarkable, globalized phenomenon (76).

<sup>15</sup> Muckelbauer illustrates his point with this example: Aristotle’s *Physics*, he writes, may be “as suggestive or useful a text as the *Rhetoric* or, quite possibly, as *on the Generation of Plants* (141).

<sup>16</sup> Marc Bousquet argues that the decades-long practice of hiring lecturers to teach composition has diminished institutional support for Rhetoric and Composition in a way unparalleled (as of yet) in other disciplines.

<sup>17</sup> An example of this is the recent decision at Indiana University to merge its Department of Communication and Culture, School of Journalism, and Department of Telecommunications into a new Media School, and to dissolve the degree program in Rhetoric and Public Culture.

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