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## Hacking the Academy

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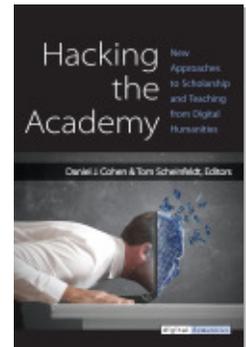
Published by University of Michigan Press

Cohen, Dan & Scheinfeldt, Joseph T..

Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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# Take an Elective

Sharon Leon

Tasked with establishing a university for Catholics in Ireland in the 1850s, Cardinal John Henry Newman distilled his understanding of the university as a place for teaching, learning, and conversation where inquiry is pushed forward. Though Newman was focused on the undergraduate education of men, by men, his insights hold import for all of us, including those of us with advanced degrees. Newman discussed the importance of exposing students to many perspectives in his essay, “The Idea of a University.”

. . . the drift and meaning of a branch of knowledge varies with the company in which it is introduced to the student. If his reading is confined simply to one subject, however such division of labour may favour the advancement of a particular pursuit . . . certainly it has a tendency to contract his mind. If it is incorporated with others, it depends on those others as to the kind of influence which it exerts upon him. . . .

It is a great point then to enlarge the range of studies which a University professes, even for the sake of the students; and, though they cannot pursue every subject which is open to them, they will be the gainers by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle. This I conceive to be the advantage of a seat of universal learning, considered as a place of education. An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, this effort to produce well-rounded human beings rather than intensely specialized practitioners appeared to have significant benefits for both the students and the faculty.

If we are to consider how we might change the practices of the academy to help us begin to move past a place of systemic dysfunction, we have to propose solutions that seem realistic to both junior and senior faculty in more traditional positions. How? *Take an elective*. Embrace eclecticism, and give yourself permission to dedicate some percentage of your week to learning or investigating something completely new, in the service of having more intellectual fun.

Remember what it felt like to take an elective that truly excited you? Remember the joy of doing something just because it was fun and challenging, in and of itself? Perhaps this is a scholarly version of Google's 20 percent rule, where employees get one day a week to work on their own projects. But since as academics we are mostly self-directed, this time be dedicated to moving beyond the core forms of individual work that are the benchmarks of disciplinary promotion and tenure. Consider a new methodological approach. Produce work that takes a nontraditional form. Work with colleagues from other disciplines. Then, step forward and proclaim the results as being central to the future health and welfare of the academy. This elective work has the potential to enlarge the way that we think about and evaluate scholarship. Thus, it can remind the academy as a whole that the value of our work is not that it results in a monograph or a bevy of articles in major scholarly journals, but that it opens up new lines of inquiry and pushes our collective understanding of the world forward.

## Note

1. John Henry Newman, "The Idea of a University," *Newman Reader*, September 2001, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/index.html>, 100–101.