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A B S T R A C T

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ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

An **academic discipline** or **field of study** is a branch of knowledge that is taught and researched as part of higher education. A scholar's discipline is commonly defined and received by the university faculties and learned societies to which he or she belongs and the academic journals in which he or she publishes research.

Disciplines vary between well-established ones that exist in almost all universities and have well-defined rosters of journals and conferences and nascent ones supported by only a few universities and publications. A discipline may have branches, and these are often called sub-disciplines.

There is no consensus on how some academic disciplines should be classified, for example whether anthropology and linguistics are discipline of social sciences or fields within the humanities.

The following outline is provided as an overview of and topical guide to academic disciplines.

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Discipline is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a branch of learning or scholarly instruction." Fields of study as defined by academic discipline provide the framework for a student's program of college or post baccalaureate study, and as such, define the academic world inhabited by scholars. Training in a discipline results in a system of orderly behavior recognized as characteristic of the discipline. Such behaviors are manifested in scholars' approaches to understanding and investigating new knowledge, ways of working, and perspectives on the world around them. Janice Beyer and Thomas Lodahl have described disciplinary fields as providing the structure of knowledge in which faculty members are trained and socialized; carry out tasks of teaching, research, and administration; and produce research and educational output. Disciplinary worlds are considered separate and distinct cultures that exert varying influence on scholarly behaviors as well as on the structure of higher education.

The number of disciplines has expanded significantly from those recognized in early British and German models. Debates are ongoing about the elements that must be present to constitute a legitimate disciplinary field. Among such elements are the presence of a community of scholars; a tradition or history of inquiry; a mode of inquiry that defines how data is collected and interpreted, as well as defining the requirements for what constitutes new knowledge; and the existence of a communications network.

Disciplines and the Structure of Higher Education

Influence in the academic profession is derived from disciplinary foundations. A hierarchical structure of authority is not possible in colleges and universities given the autonomy and expert status of faculty with respect to disciplinary activities. Consequently, the structure of higher education is an associational one based on influence and persuasion. Interaction between the professor and the institution is in many ways shaped by the professor's disciplinary affiliation. This condition is not only a historical artifact of the German model of

higher education that was built on the "scientific ethos" from which status in the profession has been derived, but it also results from faculty members having their primary allegiance to a discipline, not to an institution. Disciplinary communities establish incentives and forms of cooperation around a subject matter and its problems. Disciplines have conscious goals, which are often synonymous with the goals of the departments and schools that comprise an institutional operating unit.

Colleges and universities are typically organized around clusters of like disciplines that have some cognitive rationale for being grouped together. The seat of power for decisions on faculty promotion, tenure, and, to some extent, support for research and academic work, lies in the academic department. Thus discipline as an important basis for determining university structure becomes clear. In institutions placing lesser emphasis on research and in institutions more oriented toward teaching, the faculty may adopt more of a local or institutional orientation than a cosmopolitan or disciplinary orientation. In these institutions faculty performance and recognition may be based on institutional as opposed to disciplinary structures. Therefore, the strength of discipline influence on organizational structure in research institutions, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges, for example, can be expected to vary.

Discipline Classification Systems

Numerous analytical frameworks are evident in the literature for classifying academic disciplines for purposes of comparative study. Four of these frameworks have drawn much of the focus of empirical work in the study of discipline differences. These are codification, level of paradigm development, level of consensus, and the Biglan Model. Each of these frameworks is reviewed in turn with relevant commentary on categorical variation determined through empirical study.

Codification. Codification refers to the condition whereby knowledge can be consolidated, or codified, into succinct and interdependent theoretical formulations. As a cognitive dimension, codification describes a field's body of knowledge as opposed to behavioral attributes of scholarly activity. Use of the codification framework in the study of discipline has essentially been displaced by the use of the high-low consensus concept, because consensus, or level of agreement among scholars, has been determined to be a function of codification.

Paradigm development. Paradigm development, as first developed by Thomas S. Kuhn, refers to the extent to which a discipline possesses a clearly defined "academic law" or ordering of knowledge and associated social structures. "Mature" sciences, or with well-developed paradigms such as physics, are thought to have clear and unambiguous ways of defining, ordering, and investigating knowledge. At the opposite end of the scale are fields such as education and sociology, which are described as preparadigmatic. These fields are characterized by a high level of disagreement as to what constitutes new knowledge, what are appropriate methods for inquiry, what criteria are applied to determine acceptable findings, what theories are proven, and the importance of problems to study. The terms *paradigm development* and *consensus* are thought to be interchangeable as they describe a common dimension of disciplinary fields—the extent of agreement on structure of inquiry and the knowledge it produces.

Consensus. The core of the paradigm development concept is the degree of consensus about theory, methods, techniques, and problems. Consensus implies unity of mind on elements of social structure and the practice of science. The indicators of consensus in a field are absorption of the same technical literature, similar education and professional initiation, a cohesiveness in the community that promotes relatively full communication and unanimous professional judgments on scientific matters, and a shared set of goals, including the training of successors.

Researchers commonly attribute high levels of consensus to the physical sciences, low levels to the social sciences, and even lower levels to the humanities.

Greater particularistic tendencies, that is, judgments based on personal characteristics, have been exhibited by low-consensus disciplines. For example, in award structures in the sciences, the lower the consensus level the more awards are based on personal characteristics. With respect to the peer-review process, low-consensus editorial board members have been shown to be more likely to accept publications from their own universities. Also, in selection of editorial board members, low-consensus journals put more emphasis on personal knowledge of individuals and their professional associations.