

Promoting Equality in Higher Education

Hall, M., & Herwitz, D. (2007). Promoting Equality in Higher Education: An Interview with Martin Hall. Journal of the International Institute, University of Michigan, 14(2). <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0014.213>

Daniel Herwitz (DH): Martin Hall, you have been here at the University of Michigan for the past week involved in our Poorest of the Poor Conference, helping us plan for an enhanced presence in South Africa, and also continuing your work with Marvin Krislov and David Featherman on a comparative study of affirmative action and equity between two elite public universities, the University of Michigan and the University of Cape Town. Would you begin by telling us about that comparative work?

Martin Hall (MH): This is an engagement that started a number of years ago and has taken the form of two high-level seminars so far: one here in Ann Arbor and a follow up in Cape Town. The fascinating issues before us are that both the University of Cape Town and the University of Michigan are public universities and also highly selective universities. Michigan has been thrust into the limelight with the recent Supreme Court rulings on affirmative action; key jurisprudence has been written around its role. Michigan has very seriously deepened our understanding in South Africa of the educational, ethical, legal, and constitutional issues around affirmative action and admissions. What then becomes interesting is the comparison with the South African situation. Since 1994 and the abolition of formal segregation policies in South Africa, we have been on a track to rapid readjustment in terms of principles of social justice. We've a new constitution and higher education policy. We are similar to Michigan, but there are also differences. First, interpretations of your constitution in the Supreme Court specify that you may not use the constitution explicitly to redress past wrongs; that is the interpretation of your equal protection clauses. Our constitution says absolutely the inverse. The South African constitution says that we must put in place procedures to correct past and continuing discrimination. Second, your fundamental concerns are with minority rights, while our fundamental concerns are with majority rights. Now that sets up very interesting cross currents of debate. That is coming together in a book that we are preparing for the University of Michigan Press called *The Next Twenty-Five Years*. Ironically, since we started on the book, you have had Proposal Two on the ballot. We in turn have come under greater pressure on our equity policies. So these are moving targets.

website:	www.martinhall.org
email:	martinhall@martinhall.org
LinkedIn:	www.linkedin.com/in/martin-hall-connected-learning-studio/

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Volume 14, Issue 2, Winter 2007

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0014.213>

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Martin Hall, deputy vice-chancellor for planning and development at the University of Cape Town, visited U-M in February to deliver a lecture, "Poverty, Inequality, and the Public University," at the Poorest of the Poor Conference. He was also here to consult with co-authors David Featherman (U-M psychology) and Marvin Krislov (U-M vice president and general counsel) on their upcoming book about increasing diversity in higher education. Professor Hall is an anthropologist and archeologist, and has written extensively on southern African history, culture, and higher education policy.

Daniel Herwitz is director of the U-M Institute for the Humanities, Mary Croushore Professor of Humanities, and the former director of the Centre for Knowledge and Innovation at the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa. He is the author of Race and Reconciliation (Minnesota, 2003), and recently completed Diana's Grace, a book about film, celebrity, and stardom. Herwitz holds positions in philosophy, history of art, art and design, and screen arts and cultures, and currently serves as co-director of U-M's Human Rights Initiative.

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DH: As part of your profile, you are a deputy vice-chancellor at the University of Cape Town for transformation. The issues of transformation are paramount for all South African universities at a moment of tremendous political transition of the kind that South Africa has been in the whirl of since 1991. Can you talk about the way in which your university has addressed its own transformation, and also speak to some of the outstanding issues?

MH: I see transformation as having two layers. First of all, there are a set of conditions around achieving equity in student enrollment and staff employment. We are still an unrepresentative university as many formerly white universities actually are, both in terms of our student admissions and staff profile. We have to continue to be fierce about seeking the opportunity for all South Africans to reach their potential through enrollment. That is forcing us into a greater engagement with prior schooling, the equivalent of your K-12, as we have a supply-side problem because of the lasting damage to the schooling system during the Apartheid period, particularly in science and mathematics. We have been engaged in that since the mid-1980s and are doing reasonably well. If you come to a graduation ceremony at UCT now in engineering, it is overwhelmingly a black affair. Transformation of academic staff is far more challenging and a much longer-term process. We are not making the progress we want—we are not representative—and the consequence of that is there is a lot of talent out there that is not being brought into universities.

The real challenge beyond those issues is what we broadly call a change in institutional culture, which really combines all of the institutional forms and structure that make up the university. It ranges from the way people behave toward each other to traditions, the way the university marks its existence, right through of course to the formalities of the curriculum—the way the curriculum is structured, the way our programs are put together. That raises deeper philosophical questions about what it means for a university to aspire to a role in scholarship while also aspiring to be appropriate and relevant to its immediate environment. That debate is really just beginning. You have to remember that the University of Cape Town started off in the early nineteenth century as an academy to train colonial civil servants. So we have come a long way, we like to think.

DH: The South African university exists between two highly stressed poles: on the one hand a commitment to abstract research, on the other, a deeply community-driven set of research programs. What does it mean for a university of limited means at a moment of transformation to maintain both?

MH: Let me respond to your question in a slightly tangential way. I think we are only beginning to understand the implications of what Manuel Castells called “the network society.” The revolution of the late 1980s essentially brought us massively improved international communications technologies and different ways of dealing with marginality, distance, and information flow. Most of the early predictions of what form that network society should take have turned out to be fantasies, and things have happened that are completely the opposite of what was expected. Contrary to expectation, the availability of digital technology and broad information networks has actually led to a concentration of resources rather to their

decentralization. So what we see now is that major world centers like New York and London are attracting greater and greater knowledge resources. The University of Cape Town is a 12-hour flight from anywhere other than central or southern Africa, and we've limited capacity. We have to recognize we can't do certain things because of our size and position. I do not think we will be able to compete, nor should we be able to keep competing, in the area of theoretical physics for instance—not because we do not have the intellectual aptitude, but because we cannot build the critical mass. Our researchers are encouraged to form global networks in order to maintain quality and engagement. On the other hand, we have assets that you do not have, and one of the primary ones is location. So for example, anybody in zoology who wants to study the Southern Ocean better form a connection with UCT. Everybody involved with issues in urban development recognizes that the pace is going to be set by cities in the south, which is where the real growth in migration is going to happen.

As for the issue of community-driven research, the University of Cape Town is a university located in one of the most unequal societies in the world if you measure inequality in terms of household incomes. The university lives on a social fault line. That poses very interesting questions of how the university applies its knowledge. The track to avoid is setting up an opposition between community research and so-called blue sky research; it is better to speak of problems of translation. The difficulty that we have is how to take the wealth of knowledge that is actually contained within the heads of the people who work with us and to translate that in such a way that it has meaning in the lives of people, meaning in public policy, meaning in application. Almost every unit of our university grapples with this everyday.

DH: It seems to me something unique follows from this problem of translation—this I say from my own years in your country. Your universities train students and scholars in how to exist between multiple frameworks and gain from them. So for example the theater department at University of Cape Town is busy putting on Samuel Beckett and Athol Fugard, while also working in community theater in the township of Clanwilliam, where most people are impoverished, while also thriving in their own cultural vitality. Living between modern European theater and African choir, Gumboot Dancing, and local performance allows new forms of hybridity and synthesis. But it also trains the student, scholar, or artist in living between forms of life that do not quite fit.

MH: Yes, I think that the value lies in diversity. We often see diversity as an issue of distributive justice or human rights, which of course it is. But, I also think that diversity is a key asset in knowledge creation as well—it's diversity of experiences and diversity of information that's coming into play. And I think that the great American universities have always understood that, which is why they've been so successful at seeking out talent from across the world. The thing that has always attracted me to the University of Michigan is that it's simultaneously an intensely and locally engaged university, with the issues of Michigan and the issues of the state of Michigan, but at the same time, it's an international university that draws scholarship from around the world and celebrates that. I think people instinctively recognize the richness of that. And for me it tracks back to John Dewey, Paolo Friere, and others, the notion of experiential learning and engaged research, research that doesn't take things for granted, that seeks out things that are new, looks for inspiration.

The extraordinary thing about universities in South Africa, prior to 1994 is that we survived at all. Because the notion of a university that segregated by race is not only a violation of human rights, it's also a violation of the concept of knowledge. If difference is abolished then what have we got to learn from each other? I mean, if we all know each other and we know everything about each other, what more can we possibly learn? We're going to stagnate intellectually. So it's actually quite remarkable, I think, that segregated universities did survive.

I think that since 1994 universities in South Africa have become very vibrant, complex, sometimes difficult cauldrons of experimentation with ideas. You quite rightly have focused attention on the humanities and the richness that is emerging there in new forms of art, culture, and expression. The same really applies across to the other side of the campus in areas like public health—the challenges of epidemiology, for example. The poor communities in Cape Town are immensely interesting and difficult from the public health point of view because you're not dealing with homogenous populations with similar health care and disease patterns.

You're dealing with really complicated interplays of epidemiology. So some of the most fascinating public health problems come from that very diversity and richness of experience, and that's what knowledge creation thrives on.

DH: Many thanks for this interview, Martin.

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Print ISSN: 1074-9055 • Online ISSN: 1558-741X