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12. The Future Lies Ahead (With Apology to Mort Sahl)

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12. The Future Lies Ahead (With Apology to Mort Sahl)

Abstract
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Keywords
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Comments

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12.

THE FUTURE LIES AHEAD (With Apology to Mort Sahl)

by David B. Lipsky

The progress and development of the ILR School during the past 50 years, though sometimes uneven in both pace and direction, has largely met the promise and expectations embodied in the founding legislation. The fulfillment of the legislative purpose testifies to the contributions of those many individuals and institutions with whom we have interacted over this period of astonishing growth in size, complexity of structure and programs, and recognized stature at home and abroad in both the academic and practitioner worlds. Because the largest part of my professional life has been spent as a member of the ILR community—as undergraduate student in the school's early years, as faculty member, and now, until my pending retirement in that role, as dean, in this last chapter I want to offer some observations on the school's future that have been informed by this experience. Although these are personal views, I am confident that they are not unique but are shared widely among the school's constituencies of faculty, students, alumni, and the external publics we have served over the years.

Although one hopes that the future of an institution such as the ILR School can be what we want it to be, it is important to recognize and acknowledge the limits of control. That is a lesson we have learned from coping with and adapting to a constantly changing environment in our 50-year history. I will not burden you with the details of that experience, but it is useful to contrast briefly the economic, social, and political environment of the school as a nascent institution in the late 1940s and 1950s and the comparable dimensions of its more recent past.

Yesterday

Perhaps the major environmental fact of the early postwar years was the economic and political prominence of labor-management relations. The wartime restraints imposed on a growing labor movement—over a third of private sector employment was organized and merger of the AFL and the CIO was in the wings—and on major industries determined to slow or thwart further union advances were being removed at the time the school was founded. Apprehension in the postwar period over a possible recurrence of a major economic recession, on the one hand, and an equally intense concern over inflation, on the other, were pervasive topics of discussion in the daily press as well as the scholarly journals. Much of this discussion focused on the institution of collective bargaining.

Expansion of the social "safety net" established in the New Deal period, including eventually private as well as public programs dealing with occupational safety and health, was pushing the boundaries of industrial and labor relations as a field of study and practice well beyond their prewar range.

The relevance of an institution such as the ILR School, accordingly, was manifest. The need to understand the processes involved and to train industrial relations practitioners, as the New York State legislature had anticipated, was clear. There was little difficulty in our formative years in obtaining the resources to develop programs both in Ithaca and in the extension centers elsewhere in the state. Endorsements from the then politically more influential labor movement and from management organizations familiar with our programs, as well as the reputation of Cornell, generally favored our case in the annual budget negotiations.

Today

The environment in which the school functions today is quite different from the early years. The labor movement in the United States has lost strength and influence. Though signs of revival are emerging, a return to the level of influence it enjoyed in the early years of the school remains problematic. A strong political movement to weaken and even roll back the social advances of the earlier years has achieved substantial voter approval. Public support for higher education generally has weakened while institutions such as ours are expected to produce more with relatively fewer resources. In recent years the school has suffered a series of relatively large cuts in state funding, forcing layoffs and early retirements of key support personnel.

At the micro level, where much of our research and teaching are focused, there are significant developments that challenge us. Chief among them are the changes in the nature and organization of work, propelled by technological advances such as computerization at a pace even more rapid than the automation movement of the 1960s and '70s; the increasing globalization of production and employment, blurring the lines between foreign and domestic labor markets; the rise of the human resource management function; and the much discussed inequality in the distributions of income and employment opportunities.

In sum, labor-management relations may not be quite as close to center stage as they were 50 years ago, but issues of the workplace and employment relations are, if anything, more important than they were at the time of the school's founding.

In the face of these developments, some other major academic institutions have abandoned or downsized their industrial relations programs, or have folded them into other programs. At the same time, graduate or professional industrial relations and human resource degree programs have proliferated, usually in smaller colleges and with limited faculty resources. Meanwhile the ILR School continues to enjoy its strong reputation as the nation's leading institution for the

preparation of individuals trained to make useful and important contributions to both the practice and study of industrial relations and human resource management. Applications for admission at both undergraduate and graduate levels continue to be strong and on a rising curve of quality. We successfully met out commitment to raise, as a part of Cornell's five-year capital campaign, $20.5 million, and I believe that by that magical year 2000, when all the donor pledges made in the course of the campaign have been fulfilled, the school's endowment will very likely reach $12 million, four times its size in 1990. And, of course, well before that date our new building, equipped with state-of-the-art educational technology appropriate to our mission, will have been completed and occupied.

Today's Challenges

Despite all of this apparent good news, I must express my concern about our capacity to maintain the unique position we have attained in our field. I am confident we can overcome or at least adapt without major retreat from our original mission to the assaults on our budget and the emergence of competing programs. That can only happen, however, if the ILR faculty continues the practice of critical self-examination that has from the beginning been so essential to our growth and survival in the face of constantly changing environments in education and in our specialized field of study. The school has been able to meet challenges in the past because of the faculty's collective willingness to diagnose our problems objectively and debate proposed solutions vigorously but collegially.

I worry that this propensity has weakened in recent years, not because of indifference or because of the growth (perhaps especially among younger faculty) of a kind of professional narcissism. In my view, it is because of two impersonal factors. One is the growth of specialization in the basic social science fields that inhibits both our knowledge and our interest in the work of colleagues outside our own discipline. Consequently, our ability to communicate across disciplinary lines, even within the school, has been weakened. The second factor is that we have recruited new faculty from first-rate graduate programs in basic social and behavioral sciences, but in which industrial and labor relations per se is not the core of the program. The orientation of these more recent faculty cohorts tends toward the home discipline, to an external reference group rather than an internal one. For an interdisciplinary program such as ours, the continuation of these developments could threaten our future, especially if they become embedded in our teaching and research and in our participation in public service. We could well become second rate, or as I said to the faculty at its first meeting of the 1995-96 year, we could become the "last dinosaur alive."

So I believe it is imperative that we revive the spirit of collegiality and commitment to the school's original and still-relevant mission through a continuation and strengthening of our habits of self-diagnosis, self-criticism, and self-healing. This may require some changes in organization, in the relationship between faculty and administration, for example. Basically, however, it will

require a common vision and commitment to strategic goals that will guide the school's programs into the new century.

Goals I Propose

Here are four goals that I propose can provide the framework for our future development.

First, the ILR School should continue its unique interdisciplinary approach to the study of industrial and labor relations, but with an effort to improve the topical balance of its programs between domestic and international issues. Since the late 1980s we have made excellent progress in studying and analyzing the industrial relations systems of other countries. Our concerted effort to "internationalize," however, may have diverted our attention from a number of crucial domestic issues. Admittedly, some of these domestic issues are related to the increased globalization of labor and product markets. The interplay of domestic and international industrial relations developments needs to be explored intensely on every level. I am confident that such exploration will, if pursued in an interdisciplinary framework, strengthen our commitment to our original mission while it enriches our teaching, research, and public service efforts. Our goal here should be nothing less than leadership in this essential merger of the two spheres of our subject matter.

Second, the ILR School should become a leader in providing up-to-date, high-quality training and retraining for industrial and labor relations professionals. Our responsibility to the field should not terminate with the graduation of well-prepared students, as important as that is. In a world of extremely rapid technological, industrial, and economic change affecting job content and responsibility, it is no longer sufficient to entrust maintenance of professional competence to informal in-service or on-the-job training. Professional workers, it is now clear, are at least as much at risk of displacement as other workers. They need well-organized, quality programs to upgrade and maintain their skills. We have made some advance in this direction with our CAHRS and executive education programs. We need to expand this approach, where appropriate, to embrace other organizational and occupational publics that are currently underserved in this regard.

Third, the school must exploit the opportunities presented by the emerging technologies of instruction and research in order to remain relevant and to achieve a world-class status in the field of industrial and labor relations. Our students and other constituencies that we serve are becoming increasingly sophisticated in the use of the computer. They are familiar with the potentialities of this tool and with other developments for communication and learning. A growing number of courses are incorporating the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web as instructional tools, for example, and for several years we have been experimenting with "distance learning." Our students and extension clients expect our programs to utilize these new technologies to their fullest potential; but we have not kept up

to the degree necessary. Our new Catherwood Library and the new classrooms and laboratories will advance us toward this goal, but only if the ILR faculty itself upgrades its competence in the use of the new technologies. The faculty and administration should in the near future consider the installation of a continuing program of in-service training to develop and maintain faculty competence in the use and exploitation of new educational and communication technologies.

Finally, to achieve the foregoing objectives we need a major change in the management of the school's financial resources. A series of significant cuts in state support and a vastly increased dependence on private sources make it imperative that we bring our budgeting practices into line with the realities of the financial environment in which we operate. Although the office of the dean will necessarily carry the major responsibility for the school's budget, I look forward to greater participation by faculty through the departments and other administrative units in both its shaping and implementation. The past has been marked by too much ad hoc expenditure decision making and loose control over the allocation of revenues. We need a system of financial management capable of responding to unexpected short-term changes in the flow of funds, if necessary, but which makes tracking income and outgo accurate and feasible.

All four of these goals are consistent with the objectives set forth in a draft strategic planning report advanced for Cornell University as a whole. If we can achieve these goals in the next decade or so, the ILR School will strengthen both itself and the university. While I have eschewed discussion of the implementation of these goals because that will involve a process of detailed planning and negotiation best left to the actors on the scene, I am confident that at the close of its next half-century the ILR School will still be a leader in understanding the world of work, regardless of the changes in its contours, and in preparing students and others to meet its challenges.