



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Articulating Your Intellectual Project

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(An audio version of this blog may be accessed [here](#).)

As scholar/teachers, we must have and be able to articulate our intellectual project. It is good if it happens in the early career stages of a scholarly career, but it is never too late.

A scholar's intellectual project is:

- the philosophical cornerstone of their scholarly career
- the 50,000 foot/big picture pursuit of their intellectual work
- the grounding of their work
- the perennial question, issue, the quest
- the epistemological guiding-star for decision-making toward that which the scholar works their entire career; their scholarly passion and intellectual haunting, that which they are interested in—regardless of their status or season of their career.

The intellectual project is your big pursuit, your big idea. Your intellectual project is why you wanted to be a scholar and why you continue in scholarship.

There will always be smaller, contributory ventures which engage, address, and actualize your central inquiry or question, BUT those smaller schemes are never the whole of your intellectual

project. They may satisfy an aspect or element of your intellectual aspiration. However, the desire of your intellectual inquiry is bigger, much bigger, than any one expression created as a single book, journal article, course offering, or artistic rendering.

The key is to be able to articulate the most basic description of your intellectual project. This is a necessary to your scholarship and to participating in a scholarly community. Your intellectual project, over the course of your career, and over the seasons of your work, will refine, deepen. The project might even shift and change. Regardless of these potential changes and shifts, your articulation of your principal project is paramount.

An intellectual project is not:

- a single job or your career; on the contrary, your places of employment are in service to your project
- a single grant proposal or committee accomplishment
- a single publication or panel participation
- defined by your approaches to your scholarship; the methodologies of engagement of your project are not the project
- dependent upon nor redundant to the conversation in your academic field; your project is meant to add to the conversation already in the field.

You need a boiler plate speech.

Your project must be articulatable in 3 to 7 sentences. You should have a succinct paragraph that describes, in its most basic, your intellectual project. This is as much for your own comfort and focus as for those who will ask you about your work. Knowing your project, as well as being able to succinctly communicate your project, allows you to work your project.

This work is not easy. Your intellectual project's articulation might feel elusive or vague. Intellectual projects can be bold/ "in your face"/dazzling. They can also be coy, temperamental, and evasive. Knowing your project is good—being able to articulate your project is what is needed; articulation may take time and great effort.

Questions to spark, encourage, point toward clarity of articulation of your intellectual project:

- What is your curiosity? Or, to what are you compelled? To what are you called?
- What are your perennial questions? What are your big, philosophical, epistemological questions that are worth spending a career or lifetime pursuing?
- What issues would you study/explore/interrogate/pursue with or without salary?
- What agenda do you bring to every job?
- Toward what questions or issues do you bend every job, all writing, and all your courses?
- What has broken your heart and so now, to mend your heart, what will your scholarship be about?
- What is your immortal wound, and how are you saving your own life through scholarly

pursuit?

- What, for a lifetime, will you resist, protest, contest, and fight against? What wrong will you right? What makes you so mad that you spring into action – especially the action of intellectual work and scholarly labor?
- What is your vision for the new world and how will this vision be embodied by your scholarship?
- At the end of your life, when you look back over your long and illustrative career, to what did you say *yes*?

What is the pattern of your *yes-saying* and what can you glean as having been your project?

- Who is your inspiration and what was/is their project? How will you attach to it; fulfill it?
- What is the intersection of your gifts/talents with the mighty needs of the world?
- Why did your people send you to school? For them, what will be your scholarly accomplishment and contribution? How will your scholarship liberate your people?

Intellectual projects are often vivid to other people, ask someone who knows you and your work. What do they believe your project is?

Going through a search process routinely helps with clarifying your intellectual passion, focus, and intent. These processes force you to articulate your vision, perspective, aspirations, and scholarly itches. Consider applying for a job and see what happens with articulating your intellectual project.

Beyond participating in a search process, consider the following to assist with coming to know and articulate your project:

- Write and rewrite a mission statement, write an elevator speech, write in simple prose, 3 to 7 sentences; practice those sentences on family, friends, and colleagues until they make sense to them and have resonance with you.
- In question format—create a list of 50 to 100 questions which frame your curiosity and pursuits, then cull the list down to the questions you want to pursue for years to come.
- In poetic or in creative forms, design a rendition of your intellectual project, then contemplate it; after contemplation, write your paragraph.
- If your scholarly project is woven into a course, assign students the task of mapping, charting, posterizing or displaying the basic concepts of the course. This allows you a perspective to see what you talk about when you talk about what you talk about. Often our students know our work of thinking better than we do.
- Invite several faculty colleagues to create public or digital displays of their intellectual projects then host a gathering to explore and celebrate the current and future work of the colleague.
- Plan several recorded conversations with a trusted colleague who will dialogue with you as you think through, think out loud, and articulate.
- Re-read your dissertation. Use that as a springboard to say what you are, actually, about.

<https://wabash.center/2024/04/articulating-your-intellectual-project/>