

Of Foxes, Hedgehogs, and Marquette Law School

It has become an accepted truism in academia that there are two fundamental intellectual styles: the fox and the hedgehog. The ancient Greek poet Archilochus observed that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Following Sir Isaiah Berlin’s famous interpretation of the line, we have come to believe that intellectual pursuits (and careers) are characterized by either a singular, coherent, abiding focus or a collection of approaches and ideas that are seemingly unconnected, eclectic, and even disorganized. The notion has transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries and been adopted



Daniel J. Myers joined Marquette University as provost on July 1, 2015. *Marquette Lawyer* invited Provost Myers to introduce himself.

by scholars in fields ranging from the most interpretive and humanistic to the most basic of the sciences and even to the most practical technical disciplines. Indeed, I first considered my own orientation across this divide after reading biologist Stephen Jay Gould’s treatise, *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister’s Pox*, in the wake of being accused of dilettantism by my long-suffering Ph.D. advisor. As a sociologist who dabbled in game theory, economics, pure mathematics,

psychology, computer science, and even a little sociology in the course of creating my dissertation, I did not find it difficult to recognize myself as a fox. Happily, the fox orientation has proved to be invaluable as an academic administrator, where one is required, often on an hourly basis, to shift cultures and vocabularies.

While hedgehogs and foxes sometimes cast aspersions toward one another of being either myopic or unfocused, they usually are content to ignore one another and go about their pursuits (or pursuit, in the case of the pure hedgehog) without worrying about the failings of the other. At times, however, some can recognize the value of both styles: the fox can bring in novel insights from flitting around the disciplines, while the hedgehog uses those outsights to bear down on the fundamental problem monopolizing its gaze.

In turn, the foxes help transmit the advances achieved by their hedgehog friends, helping produce new applications of those ideas, both in other disciplines and practical settings.

This distinction applies not just to individual academicians but also to academic organizations (departments, schools, colleges, centers, and institutes). Research centers, for example, may be more hedgehog-like if they are constructed to focus attention on a specific problem and are populated with scholars from a subdiscipline who are concatenating their resources to get better leverage over that problem. Or, they can be more fox-like if they organize themselves as a purposely multidisciplinary entity, either bringing foxes in touch with hedgehogs or attempting to produce a fox functionality by linking a disparate collection of hedgehogs.

Law schools, like most academic divisions, have a natural tendency to operate more like hedgehogs than foxes, and this tendency is reinforced by an administrative structure that sets the law school in a somewhat peripheral functional location at a university. They often have separate financial arrangements, student bodies, faculties, physical facilities, and even separate grading systems and academic calendars that are not shared with the rest of the university. Given these presses, it is incumbent on law schools to resist and to find ways of becoming more vulpine in their activities and reach.

In my short time at Marquette University, I have quickly come to recognize and appreciate an explicit attempt on the part of our law school to nurture that impulse. Its Public Policy Initiative—exemplified by the “On the Issues” series—has made it, without question, “Milwaukee’s public square.” Its lecture series reaches across not just policy and political divides but also disciplinary chasms, particularly as related to the urban condition. And its ongoing voter poll is interdisciplinary by definition, producing data of the highest quality, used both by scholars and journalists. These activities not only benefit those outside the university, but they make us a better Marquette and make the Law School a richer experience for its students and faculty.

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