should take on – to read and discuss this history, to have our students do
the same, to take the small corrective actions we all can take within our
own arenas of influence, and to take whatever bigger corrective actions
our careers’ opportunities may on occasion permit.

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Brutish and bloody ethnic slaughter across the globe. Dangerous
environmental degradation. Stifling cultural ennui within rampant turbo-
consumerism. Menacing saber rattling from Gaza to the Taiwan Strait.
Narrow problematics in education research.

A senior official of the U.S. Office of Education once lamented the
tepid appeal of education research, its relative “lack of drama,” and the
resulting difficult sell in Congressional funding battles. “No congressman’s
daughter,” claimed Francis A.J. Ianni, “has ever died of a split infin-
titive.” (See page 169 of An Elusive Science.) A tribute to Lagemann’s
well-deserved reputation as a leading and engaging historian, An Elusive
Science establishes a compelling case for greater attention to the “hows
and whys” of education research over the last century, and develops an
incisive “argument from history about current problems associated with
educational scholarship.” In the end, she tells of an “ongoing story about
larger constellations of social values and views that have often found their
clearest manifestations in debates about education.” If we want to improve
education, claims Lagemann, we need to improve what passes as education
research; in order to do that, we must understand and address the historical
conditions that have constraint its development. This is a book you will
want within arm’s reach, essential deep context to the flash and flurry of
educational issues that flicker upon your computer screen.

“Intentionally shaped to be more interpretative than comprehensive,”
Lagemann’s account argues that “the most powerful forces [that] have
shaped educational scholarship over the last century have tended to
push the field in unfortunate directions – away from close interactions
with policy and practice and toward excessive quantification and
scientism.” This history has left education research hobbled as a low status
field, isolated from mainstream intellectual ferment, narrowly defining

its agenda, diffusely structured and weakly self-regulated for rigor and quality. The “considerable jeopardy” in which the whole field of educational research finds itself may finally stimulate the needed reform impulses, and thus the telling of this troubling educational history might serve a meliorative role. ‘Tis a mighty modest optimism with which we are left!

In making her case – a “discipline history” of what is arguably not a discipline – Lagemann provides a judicious and courageous synthesis of much recent literature in education, and sets out a large framework for understanding much of education this century. While other scholars are sure to dispute details, choice of examples, overlooked threads, and theoretical perspective, Lagemann’s extended essay sketches out fresh perimeters of provocative terrain. How does education educate itself, and what has shaped the key approaches and institutions? Can there be a more fundamental concern for the profession? Such a choice of thesis also throws down a gauntlet to would-be reformers. In addition to the challenge to historians and policy makers, Lagemann’s approach would demand of reformers an explicit understanding of the research tradition(s) that informs them, and how that tradition(s) advances beyond a largely troubled history.

As in her previous work on the Carnegie Corporation and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of teaching, Lagemann bounds her study – here by “discipline,” there by institution – not to chronicle events but to frame an investigation into key underlying issues the republic faces in regards to its own paideia. What, for instance, is the nature of any science of education? When is empiricism not reductivist, and how does one reconcile interactional/relational approaches with those positing a legitimate expertise worth disseminating? Who belongs to the “community of practice,” and how does the practitioner relate to the researcher? When does a claim to pristine scientific status betray hostility to the messy realities of practice? When does a claim to quantitative precision obscure a lack of significance, and when does a claim for qualitative sensitivity obscure a subjective lack of rigor? Is it possible to re-claim and re-assess models of scientific engagement that do not arise from natural science envy, and yet require equally empirical, equally sophisticated approaches? What would that community of practice look like, and can history provide us with alternative models, “opportunities missed along the way,” broadening our imagination in order to re-organize the enterprise more effectively? (See page 246.)

Here in fact is one of the chief contributions of An Elusive Science: a reminder of the powerful utility of historical investigation, its capacity