

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

Volume 3, Number 5, 1991-92

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education ([www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)).

## Whatever Happened to THE Faculty?

**Jack H. Schuster, *The Claremont Graduate School***

Interviews with older faculty members about the quality of academic life frequently touch upon ---sometimes dwell upon ---a plaintive theme: the loss of a sense of community and shared purpose within the academy. Conversations with senior academics often are sprinkled with images of a simpler and (it would seem) happier time, with faculty collegiality perceived as having been more genuine than illusory.

The images call for the soft brush strokes of the Impressionists to capture the warmer hues of that gentler time: Faculty members gathering in late afternoon for a game of billiards at the faculty club. Faculty meetings burrowing in on truly important teaching-learning issues. In sum, faculty for whom the life academic was still more likely to be regarded as a calling, less a mere occupation (albeit a distinctive one). Wistfully these informants recall an academic landscape featuring administrators who could be trusted (not like their management-obsessed descendants); students who valued learning not just as a passport to lucrative employment (more such students, at any rate, than their career-fixated, underprepared successors); colleagues who cared more about their campus'well-being than about cosmopolitan careers driven by external grants.

I've conducted dozens of such interviews in recent years that are in no small part lamentations, yearnings for an era long past. I sometimes wonder whether their recollections have perhaps been seriously distorted by the passage of time and skewed further by

comparison to the harsher realities of the contemporary academy (and society). Are their reports a product of a fuzzy romanticism that obscures some of the hard facts of bygone academic life, like subsistence-level compensation? Can so much have changed so rapidly?

After all, these accounts are not garnered from histories of a long ago era. These interviews were not conducted with enfeebled nonagenarians recalling a distant past, but rather with vigorous men (the great majority men, anyway) typically now in their sixties. They are referring to times easily within living memory: the mid-1950s and 1960s. The questions arise: Was there really something approximating "the faculty" a mere quarter century ago? An academic community in actual being, not merely a nostalgia-induced present-day illusion? And if "the faculty" once existed, what became of it?

**Some Musings from History** The history of the academy demonstrates that once upon a time there was indeed "a faculty." Or the faculty," if you prefer. A collective joined by common purpose and widely-shared values.

In its embryonic years, stretching across several centuries, the medieval university was rationally ordered, singular in orientation. The "universitas" surely was not conflict-free; it struggled for its niche between religious and secular authority. Nonetheless, "The medieval university had a principle of unity. It was theology" (Hutchins 1936, p. 96). In some instances colleges were literally enclosed communities, including, but not limited to, the elegant Oxbridge quadrangles. There was an internal cohesion within academic communities, not so cohesive (fortunately) as to drive out all differences, but a bonding force nevertheless. The faculty was, on the whole, the faculty. As Clark Kerr (1963, p.1) reminds us, "The university started as a single community... It may even be said to have had a soul in the sense of a central animating principle."

Was this long-ago version of "the faculty" a relic that failed to outlive its guild-like medieval origins? No. Was "the faculty" doomed to perish with the increasing complexity and societal tensions of The Enlightenment? No. Was "the faculty" destined not to survive

beyond ante-bellum America? No again.

The rise of American universities in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, characterized by the irreversible forces of specialization and the salience of academic departments, weakened but did not cripple "the faculty." Inevitably, though, the mounting centrifugal forces began to take a heavy toll. The "great universities" at the turn of the century, while small indeed compared to the behemoths that many of them were to become, still resembled comprehensible communities. Harvard's total enrollment in 1889-90 was about 2100 and by 1909-10 rose to nearly 4100. In the same period Yale had more than doubled from 1500 to 3300. Among the publics, the University of California (meaning Berkeley) had sprouted from 400 to 3300; Michigan from 2200 to 4600 (Slosson, 1910). The average number of faculty per institution, which had been 10 in 1870, reached 38 by 1909 (Harris, 1972, p. 453). Hardly giants by today's norms, universities had nonetheless grown not only much larger, but also considerably more complex.

Campuses were still more-or-less simple organisms during the 1930s and 1940s. Compared to the post-war era, enrollments and physical plants were much smaller. There were many fewer administrators and other support staff. And "the faculty" was much more compact. They knew one another reasonably well even across disciplinary boundaries. The small scale and the still relatively uncomplicated nature of knowledge made a faculty community plausible. In fact, I would argue that important elements of the putative faculty community persisted into the mid-1960s or thereabouts.

**Yes, Virginia, There Was "The Faculty"** Although not as much communal cohesion survived as had existed prior to mid-century, and despite the challenges that have always faced scholars in their efforts to appreciate (much less comprehend) one another across the barriers of academic specialty, it is not too idyllic a notion to say that "the faculty" existed just a few decades ago. Did they love one another in communal harmony? Not very often, I imagine. Did they at least respect one another within limits? Well, academic lore is replete with nasty intracampus personal and professional feuds. Were some faculty members even in that more egalitarian era "more equal than others?" But of course. So, we should not get carried

away with the vision of a Golden Age that never was: an age, after all, when faculty compensation ranged from poor to miserable, when autocratic rule had many champions, when faculty were much more vulnerable. Walter Metzger (1970) provides a sobering assessment, albeit writing in turbulent times: "The annals of colleges and universities offer less a glimpse of Eden than of Armageddon."

Even so, a reasonable approximation of "the faculty" still existed a quarter century ago. It is all relative, of course. But the evidence of the times shows a greater expanse of common ground a more widely shared notion of institutional purpose and priorities and, indisputably, a much more homogeneous faculty (which is to say, overwhelmingly white male).

As enrollments, budgets, faculty, support staff, regulation --- everything--- continued to grow, the scale of things simply became less manageable, and common ground eroded steadily. The forces of dispersion have been accelerating relentlessly ever since. Consider four familiar megatrends long in evidence but still gathering momentum:

**Specialization.** By the beginning of this century, the process of academic specialization and the segmentation by fields of study were so advanced that those who championed general and liberal education had already been "overwhelmed by wave after wave of specialists" Indeed, the generalists "had already lost the main battle" (Clark, 1987). But the extent of specialization circa 1900 was nothing compared to recent times, symbolized by the launching of almost 3,000 new micro-specialized academic journals annually during the 1980s (McDonald, 1990) and the publication of an astounding 3,000 or so articles in scientific journals every 24-hour period (Schuster, 1990). (For the mathematically inclined, that computes to two articles every minute of the year!)

**Market pressures.** The iron grip of the academic marketplace has skewed compensation differentials by field to unprecedented extremes while similar pressures have led to compression among ranks in hard-to-hire fields. Perceived inequities and resentments abound (Hamermesh, 1988).

**Diversification by ethnicity and gender.** Long in arrears and still lagging far behind an equitable distribution, progress toward diversifying the faculty has been painfully slow. Even so, the demographics of a once much more homogeneous faculty have been significantly altered.

**Dilution of the "regular" faculty.** For several decades now an increasing share of faculty work has been allotted to non-regular (that is, part-time and short-term) instructional staff. (In Britain, the unflattering term "lump lecturers" is sometimes used.) Current estimates suggest that close to two-fifths of all U.S. faculty, by headcount, hold non-regular appointments. While their contributions are mighty, their presence in such unprecedented numbers further undermines the core faculty.

This recital of the obvious is not intended to lament the passage of an era. Rather it is to underscore that new realities challenge the academy at every turn to recapture a sense of common purpose. To be sure, faculties at some small colleges appear to have maintained throughout volatile times a well-functioning faculty community (Rice and Austin, 1988; Austin and others, 1991); workable scale, dedication, and leadership make that possible. But their good fortune accounts for only a small fraction of all faculty members. What about the vast majority of faculty who work in campuses larger by far and much more complex? Can some semblance of a faculty collegium be restored?

**The Challenge** This accelerating fragmentation of faculty has great significance for those of us who shape today's universities, as well as for those who prepare the faculty of tomorrow. The challenges undoubtedly will continue to multiply as the faculty increasingly splinters, but the outlook is not so grim as this account might suggest.

For one thing, the resurgence of interest in teaching --- a product of many forces reinforced by the potent assessment movement may serve not only to restore more respectability to teaching but also to strengthen that bond among a great many full-time faculty members.

Beyond the partial rehabilitation of teaching, a splendid opportunity

inheres in the unprecedented numbers of forthcoming faculty hires, a function of the several hundred thousand retirements to occur over the next decade and a half. This inevitability in turn means that the academy --- through its graduate programs and professional development activities --- can try (must try) much harder to inculcate in prospective and new faculty a keener sense of common purpose and a renewed respect for teaching.

The search for community is never easy (Palmer, 1987); the emerging academic seller's market, by shifting bargaining power to individual faculty members, can be a boon or a bust for those who seek to reweave an academic community. It boils down, in a fundamental way, to a matter of institutional priorities.

**Whatever happened to The Faculty?** Gone --- and never to be reassembled. But the dispersion of faculty into their "small worlds, different worlds" (Clark, 1987) does not foreclose opportunities; in important respects, it improves prospects, to better equip the faculty to become more effective teacher-scholars.

## **References**

Austin, A.E., Rice, R.E., Splete, A.P. & Associates (1991) *A Good Place to Work: Sourcebook for the Academic Workplace*. Washington, DC: Council of Independent Colleges.

Clark, B.R. (1987) *Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Hamermesh, D.S. (1988) Salaries: Disciplinary Differences and Rank Injustices. *Academe*, 74, 20-24.

Harris, S.E. (1972) *A Statistical Portrait of Higher Education*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hutchins, R.M. (1936) *The Higher Learning in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Kerr, C. (1963) *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ladd, C.E., Jr., & Lipset, S.M. (1975) *The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

McDonald, K.A. (1990) Scientists Urged to Help Resolve Library "Crisis" by Shunning High-Cost, Low Quality Journals, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 28, A6, A13.

Metzger, W.P. (1970) The Crisis of Academic Authority. *Daedalus*, 99.

Palmer, P.J. (1987) Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing. *Change*, 19, 20-25.

Rice, R.E. & Austin, A.E. (1988) High Faculty Morale: What Exemplary Colleges Do Right. *Change*, 20, 51-58.

Schuster, J.H. (1990) The Context of Scholarly Communication. *The Serials Librarian*, 17, 15-23/

Slosson, E.E. (1910) *Great American Universities*. New York: MacMillan.