

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

Volume 8, Number 8, 1996-97

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

## The American Professoriate in Transition

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Persistent images of the professoriate appear in American popular culture, and films contribute some of the most powerful stereotypes (Umphett, 1984). Professor Charles Kingsfield, the protagonist of *Paperchase*, possesses an intellectual confidence approaching imperiousness. Wacky, eccentric, even idiotic, professors lurch through such cinematic productions as *The Nutty Professor* and *The Absent-Minded Professor*. Darker images abound in films like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Even Ronald Reagan added to society's store of celluloid images of the professoriate with his portrayal of a college teacher who defends the educational rights of a former stripper in *She's Working Her Way Through College*.

**Today's Reality** Real professors are at once more interesting and more mundane than their images in popular culture. From the early days of this century, they have followed vocational paths to the professoriate that would have little interest for moviegoers. In truth, it was not until the 20th century that uniform standards emerged regarding the route one took to the professoriate (Gaff & Simpson, 1994). Today, for instance, a terminal degree from an accredited university is almost always requisite. Furthermore, a universal probationary period must precede promotion and tenure and, thereby, job security. At practically all institutions of higher learning professors must document proficiency in teaching along with evidence of scholarly attainment. At our leading research institutions very high standards must be met, which include significant scholarly

publication and in some fields the ability to attract grant monies. Public service and outreach are also sometimes significant parts of the formula of advancement. Nevertheless, this rather uniform "up or out" policy in higher education has produced a much more homogeneous faculty as compared to earlier times.

To say that the professoriate is in transition today is an understatement. More than ever before (although the expectations and criticisms of professors have remained surprisingly consistent over time), the professoriate seems vulnerable to strong forces both from outside and inside the academy.

**The Transition** The outside forces affecting the academy have been especially powerful. The need for scientific superiority during and after World War II resulted in higher education assuming a major national role in research and development. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the rapid growth in size and complexity of our state universities, and the massive pressures of the technology revolution have all created pressures that ultimately have changed the nature of academic life and the roles faculty members assume today.

Internal pressures for change have been equally important. Student unrest in the 1960s and 1970s; privatization of research activities; interdisciplinarity and internationalization of the curriculum; harassment, equity and free speech issues; and the overall dramatic escalation of litigation on campuses across the country all represent the enthusiasm and restlessness that accompany change from within (DeNeef & Goodwin, 1995).

**Moving Towards the Future** How have these powerful external and internal forces changed the day-to-day lives of faculty members? What policies, practices and roles are different today? What contemporary trends foreshadow the future of the professoriate?

One major shift that is already visible is the attention currently being given to how we prepare professors for the future. While Ph.D. programs equip young scholars with a constellation of skills needed to conduct research in highly specialized areas, it is widely

recognized that other professorial roles gain much less attention. On many campuses throughout the country, however, graduate students are now being provided with experiences that help them better prepare for their ensuing teaching responsibilities (Gaff & Simpson, 1994). And, in what may be an enlightening trend, the job candidate with an impressively documented teaching portfolio is often the one who gets the job.

Another trend related to the manner in which we are beginning to prepare the future professoriate is the overall importance of instruction as a part of faculty responsibility. It is no secret that external funding for research is declining. This will continue into the early part of the next century. Campuses all across our nation are already re-structuring criteria for promotion, tenure, salary decisions, and other institutional rewards. Along with this movement is a conceptual broadening of what it means to be a scholar and of the importance of incorporating peer collaboration and review in our teaching to the same extent we have in our research. (Hutchings, 1996). There can be no question that the pendulum that moved so quickly toward research as the perceived dominant activity associated with institutional reward is slowly moving back to the middle of the teaching-research continuum.

In a compelling keynote address at a 1989 national conference on higher education, Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard University, challenged the academy to take a bolder stand on important national issues like health care, ethics in business, and public education. To reclaim the public trust we have lost, Bok proposed that institutions, professions, and faculty members direct more attention to real life problems facing society. In fact, this distinguished leader of American higher education went so far as to say that in many instances universities contribute to the problem more than helping to solve it. He had the high cost of health care on his mind when he stated that the role of service and outreach at prestigious institutions has often been an orphan with no place at the table of research and teaching. There is evidence that this may be changing.

The images that abound in our society often present the college professor as a fount of knowledge, pacing back and forth in front of

the chalkboard, cutting inappropriate student remarks to shreds. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the perception on large research-oriented campuses was that research was rewarded more than teaching. The negative part of this portrayed an aloof figure, never in his or her office, traveling to far-away conferences, receiving a high salary for being on nationally important panels, and bringing lots of money to the campus. The positive part of the image included dedicated researchers who were finding cures for diseases or pioneering programs for economic growth in a third world country. The primary roles and responsibilities of faculty members in the future will be even more varied and complex. What is hoped by many, however, is that there will be equity in the way these roles are rewarded by the institution and the sponsoring public. When the day comes that a professor working with troubled children in an inner-city school gets the same attention as the professor who discovers a new macromolecule, we will know this balance has arrived.

The purpose of an institution of higher education is learning -- learning by undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff. The role of the professor is changing from a performer on a stage or in a laboratory to one who creates the circumstances from which learning occurs. What is hoped is that the traditional roles of teaching, research, and service will transcend their classic boundaries and that the work of faculty members in higher education will be viewed by the public as not only essential for the survival of our society but also essential for the general enhancement of our quality of life.

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