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Michael W. Simpson
University of Arizona

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The U.S. Academic Profession: Some Thoughts on the Past, Present, and Future

Michael W. Simpson
University of Arizona

Abstract

This essay reflects the personal and professional, the past as well as the present as they relate to the nature of college and the professors that work in them. The past is not seen nostalgically by the author, but such a romanticized view may be hindering professional empowerment by professors themselves in these times of massive administrative growth. Suggestions are given on how to possibly save the humanity of the profession and the spirit of higher education.

What makes the U.S. higher education system unique is the great diversity of institutions (Ruscio, 1987, p. 331). Yet three-fourths or more of students attend less than 25% of the institutions (Smith, 1990, p. 2). Despite the great diversity of institutions, the so-called elite universities set the tone (poison) of academic life (p.2). Other institutions chase these elites in a never-ending keystone cops scene. Thus, it should not be surprising that much of the discussion focuses on professors at such institutions and differences among professors within such institutions. Hopefully, this essay will not be thoroughly post-modern, stuck in a perpetual present (which is a condition I see more and more professors and students mired in) (Gitlin cited in Smith, p. 3). My own personal quest to understand higher education and professors grew from my dissatisfaction with my own formal education which included a disjointed array of dispersed subjects taught only rarely with any passion and no attempt to connect across disciplines. In fact, one class would counter the other. In the library, thousands upon thousands of journals lined the shelves for no one or only a few to read.

Let me jump to the end, relatively speaking, of my quest to understand higher education. My daughter attended and graduated St. John's College in Santa Fe (their first campus in Annapolis is still active). I consider this one of my great achievements. My years of searching lead me to disdain the disjointed specialization of "scientific" disciplines and the increasing privileging of jobism as the sole goal of education, or should we say training (what is so "high" about higher education today?). I failed to see how 124 credit hours in classes measuring your ability to spew back what a professor more interested in his or her real work, research, wanted to hear made one capable of conducting an intelligent conversation, acting as a citizen in a democracy, or serving as a relatively autonomous professional. St. John's embodied the principles of Robert Hutchins, the famous president of the University of Chicago that started the "junior" college within the university. Long before "Academic Capitalism" he wrote about how universities advertised the same things as resort hotels, fine buildings and associations, green grass, good food, and exercise since the university had no coherent educational program to announce (Hutchins cited in Smith, 1990, p. 132). St. John's has no departments or majors. It attracts incredible people to come work as tutors (their name for professors) who call students Mr. or Ms. just as they are also called despite amazing doctoral credentials from top universities in varied disciplines. Their pay is relatively low especially when one considers the cost of living

in beautiful Santa Fe and certainly low when compared with other professors and exceptionally low when compared to what a bio-chemist from Stanford could make in academe or elsewhere given the increasing differentials among disciplines and the pontification of hard sciences. Speaking of St. John's draws blank stares from people. The so-called elite institutions have so set the tone and discourse that possibilities are excluded. To blow their minds, I like to tell them that a Ph.D. bio-chemist may teach the Bible or Plato or music. A good research project would be what draws these people to work at St. John's. However, I believe after speaking with them that I have a thesis. After learning more and more about less and less, after being advised constantly to 'go through the motions', and after seeing how little the great universities that employed them cared about teaching and learning and how much these institutions cared about producing marketable knowledge commodities that they sought to be a scholar of old and to teach where the spirit of learning, inquiry, conversation, and a joining of knowledge together reigned. My daughter is wonderful to converse with about ideas and policies. Even if she disagrees with you, the conversation becomes a joint inquiry into deep issues. She doesn't hate you, refuse to speak or associate with you further like I see happen constantly within college these days. Unfortunately, academics seem to have lost this aspect of alleged collegiality---many do not speak to one another even within the same department because of disagreement over ideas. This deprives everyone the opportunity of growth.

I do not glorify the old days. Yet the professors of today seem to glorify the old days and many still believe that they are autonomous professionals despite the increasing introduction of the managerial professionals into their lives so that now they are managed professionals. At one time, administration and professors were the same. Professors registered students, advised students, and taught classes. But as colleges became universities connected more and more to the needs of capital and expanded course offerings and sought new students different in kind, specialization occurred such that new professionals handled administration, student services, and such while the professors taught and increasingly turned to research. Jealous of the status of German professors with their Ph.D.'s and research activity; U.S. universities developed Ph.D. programs which increasingly became required to be hired as a professor. Many of our readings see the decline in instruction as a recent phenomenon; Page Smith presents a substantial record of the abandonment of teaching early in the 20th century. Reduced funding was not the cause. While tenure and advancement today often formally equate research and teaching (40-40-20), professors know and freely admit that you "publish or perish" and rarely if ever does teaching failure decide the issue (Also see "Gresham's Law", Ruscio, 1987, p. 344). So, in response to student and parent complaints, new managerial instructional and technical professionals and/or adjuncts that focus on teaching are hired to do what professors did at one time. Discretionary time of professors is "ratcheted" for research which increasingly means seeking external funds. (Massy & Zemsky, 1994, p. 2).

Of course great differences may exist among the various disciplines (Ruscio, 1987, p. 340). Biglan (1973) found differences in teaching/research/publishing among disciplines along paradigm (hard v. soft), concern with application (pure v. applied), and concern with life systems (life v. nonlife). The type of institution also brings differences in teaching/research and other duties with university faculty devoting more time to research than teaching (Ruscio, pp. 340-342). Different institutions may bring different views of disciplines as community college

professors may describe themselves as educators with the discipline being a means to the teaching end, not an end itself (p. 347).

So how do these issues get worked out? Despite claimed autonomy, professors work within organizations, perhaps rather unique ones (Ruscio, 1987, p. 348). Higher education institutions are rather complex webs of influences and power (p. 349). Traditionally, faculty guilds influenced the institution. This collective may be challenged as external funding becomes more expected such that individuals gain influence over the group (p. 352). Are professors management or workers? For private institutions, federal labor law applies and the *Yeshiva* case found they were managers and therefore could not unionize (p. 534). The issue of unionization differentiates the profession further: private colleges are ruled by federal labor law; public college unionization is ruled by state law. Rhoades (1998) points out that even among unionized faculty, as with other faculty, work-force status (part-time v. full-time) differentiates faculty (p. 274). Other legal requirements differentiate institutions by determining form, structure, and power. For instance, some colleges are constitutional organizations, others creatures of statutes.

So with these differences are there differences in pay? For most of the time, pay across disciplines stayed pretty much the same. As external funds and producing external marketable products become the focus of academic capitalism, differences across disciplines grows (Slaughter & Rhoades, 1996, p. 330). In the so-called good ole days, the professoriate was dominated by white, well-to-do men. Today, the faculty is certainly more diverse. White women have done exceptionally well. However, at least some of the pay differences among disciplines is based upon the concentration of women within the disciplines (Bellas, 1997). F. King Alexander speculated on whether two distinct systems of higher education existed in the U.S. after his study on pay differentials between public and private research and doctoral universities revealed greater and increasing discrepancies in professor pay between the public and private sector (2001).

There is no higher education system in the U.S. Perhaps that is its greatness. There is much concern about the rest of the world catching up with us. If we keep looking at that, we will miss what has made us great-----the extreme diversity of institutions that exist for many reasons and to serve many purposes. Today, we have public colleges and universities that range from junior colleges to elite research institutions. We have small liberal arts colleges with and without religious affiliations. We have HBCUs and schools that serve the working-class. We have private non-profit, private for-profit, and increasingly combinations and partnerships mixing them all. And it seems we have a growing number of persons without institutions or on the margins of many as "independent scholars" now connect with each other through technology (are they the nucleus of a new college?) To say that the academic professionals in such diverse institutional settings share characteristics may simply be to essentialize and miss the important point---diverse institutions with diverse people. Yet perhaps some commonalities exist as Ruscio (1987) found that similarities across sector and disciplines included lust for knowledge, an inquisitive mind, an ability to focus on a question but placing in broader context, introducing perspectives out side the discipline, and a concern for people (p.358).

This is where I started this little essay with my journey to St. John's, a place where professors are not required to do research. They are learners in small groups that journey together through the great questions that have always been before us. They know their students; they eat lunch with them, celebrate with them, and are human with them. Professors lost this as they sought status, made deals with capital, and allowed managers and business into the academy. The cult of efficiency needs to be destroyed. The market does not produce human beings, though it may already hold the patent. But is such control, really the end of humanity - the abolition of man as C.S. Lewis suggests? Professors are urged by Rhoades (1997) to begin to negotiate various aspects of their conditions (p.277). I agree. In fact, such should have occurred long ago. But many professors still perceive they are an independent profession. If perception is reality, then reality is an illusion for many. Still others believe that being resource dependent we must simply serve the source, but sources can change and people can change them. We need to teach the history of education, not for trivial purposes, but so that we might still make our lives a full flourishing of our humanity and with us we can guide our students and our society. These students that we shun and ignore, that we make that dirty little bargain with, grow up and vote. I suggest that the profession has created its own problems and that it has the agency to correct those problems. Let the conversation begin - if we can talk to one another still. Maybe we have not totally killed the spirit.

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