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Being Professional Academically

R. Eugene Rice

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Over the past decade we have learned a great deal about faculty lives. New programs to address a wide-range of needs have been initiated and assessed, and research on faculty has moved ahead significantly. Much of the activity and concern with faculty development has come to focus on the academic career itself—the structure and meaning of academic work.

Already there have been a number of proposals calling for the reassessment and restructuring of the academic career. W. Todd Furniss led the way with his *Reshaping Faculty Careers* (1981); Roger Baldwin and others followed with a call for *Expanding Faculty Options* (1982), and the American Association of Higher Education is now in the process of developing a “Faculty Opportunities Audit,” intended to encourage colleges and universities to take a new look at the ways in which the professional careers of faculty on individual campuses are organized and rewarded. Before proceeding further with this emphasis on the reshaping of academic careers, there is an important but discrete task that needs doing. The interrelationship of four diverse areas of research and practice touching on the careers of faculty demands attention. These four areas and their interconnection was the subject of my Shaughnessy Scholar’s* project and the topic

*The Mina Shaughnessy Scholars Program makes grants to educational practitioners to reflect on and analyze their experiences in improving post-secondary education. The program is administered by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

on whom which I was asked to speak in the opening address at the 1983 annual conference of POD. The chart that follows identifies the four areas of research and practice:

Figure 1

This paper will deal primarily with the symbolic issue: what does it mean to be professional? Before launching into that discussion, let me say a word about each of the other areas.

Career Research. We have to learn from the research on careers in other occupations. At the recent meeting of the American Association of Higher Education, Patricia Cross identified "human resource development" as a major concern in the society over for the next decade. A great amount of new research is already being done in this area, particularly as it relates to managerial careers. In looking at this work it is clear that we need to develop a respect for the differences among faculty. For instance, faculty have different kinds of career anchors. Edgar Schein and his colleagues at MIT have been working on this topic for years. Michael Driver at the University of Southern California is examining what he calls "career concept types." The separate types require different kinds of situations in which to grow and develop—different sources of encouragement. Much is being discovered about what professionals do when they get "stuck" in mid-career and the kinds of "opportunity structures" required to sustain personal and career vitality.

Adult Development Theory. The recent work of Levinson, Gould,

Neugarten, Vaillant, and others is both illuminating and useful in understanding what is happening to faculty. Again, we treat faculty across age groups and career stages much the same. It is now evident that the developmental needs of junior faculty, part-time faculty, and those with non-tenure track appointments are very different from those of tenured, mid-career faculty. The work of David Kolb on the function of learning in our lives at different stages of development is especially significant. The need to develop those other parts of ourselves—those non-dominant learning styles—is important particularly for faculty whose lives are (or should be) committed to learning.

Institutional Policies. Longitudinal research on people in other occupations demonstrates that jobs shape people. Organizational structures and policies can encourage professional growth or lead to its attenuation. There is much about the policies that presently govern faculty careers that not only discourages development, but even arrests it.

Being Professional. The issue that intrigues me most, however, is the conceptual (symbolic) one. What does it mean to be professional academically? A good subtitle for this paper might be: "Breaking the tyranny of a social fiction." So much of what is known as faculty development has been instrumental and methodological. It is time we raise the questions of meaning. Why did we choose this profession in the first place?

In trying to make sense of what is happening to faculty, I find myself being driven back to my own discipline, sociology, and particularly to the sociology of religion. I am convinced that much about life is defined and shaped by socially constructed fictions, patterns of meaning, that cohere in a particular time and place. The American poet Wallace Stevens said it best:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction,
there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction
and that you believe in it willingly.

Nowhere in the contemporary world do socially constructed fictions have more power than in the professions and there is no profession where a socially constructed, professional imagery dominates more thoroughly than among faculty. Reference needs to be made only

to the years of graduate school socialization and the influence that academic mentors have in the lives of their protege to make the argument.

The image that dominated the academic profession prior to World War II, particularly in the liberal arts colleges that then played a larger role in higher education, was that of the teacher-scholar. William C. Nelsen, following a two-year study of faculty development programs in twenty of the nation's best liberal arts colleges, recently published a book calling for the "renewal of the teacher-scholar." The call for renewal is, itself, testimony to the demise of that occupational ideal. During the earlier decades of this century, however, the teacher-scholar was an image widely shared. Nelsen finds that teacher-scholar ideal articulated best in the Davidson College Faculty Handbook:

Ideally the college professor would be a widely respected scholar excited about learning and capable of communicating this excitement to others, a teacher deeply concerned with the welfare of students and eager to have them learn and grow, one who teaches imaginatively both by books and by personal example, a demanding yet compassionate person who respects the moral worth of students and their potential for growth.

Sometime after the mid-fifties, building on the impact of the G.I. Bill of Rights and the Russian launching of Sputnik, a major shift took place in the image of what it means to be an academic scholar. The older image of the teacher-scholar was celebrated in a series of widely publicized national awards sponsored by the Danforth Foundation. The E. Harris Harbison Award was given to ten outstanding teacher-scholars each year during the period 1962 to 1972. The Harbison Award was a nostalgic gesture; the image was dying or already dead and the award series was established posthumously—in memorium.

Beginning in the late 1950s and extending through the following decade and a half—the period frequently referred to as the "golden age" of higher education—a new model emerged. A powerful fiction, an image of what it means to be an academic professional, became firmly established among faculty. This image, or model (if we can call it that), is often reflected in institutional policy, but is most solidly ingrained in our own conceptions of ourselves as professionals.

The "Assumptive World" of the Academic Professional. In his

work on professional transitions, the family therapist Murry Collins Parkes has demonstrated the significance of what he calls the “assumptive world” in efforts to cope with change. In periods of stability a complex of basic assumptions is taken for granted, and in times of transition the assumptive world is challenged and must be fundamentally restructured. In the mid-60s, at the height of affluence and expansion in higher education, a growing consensus had emerged regarding what it meant to be fully professional academically.

The basic assumptions clustering around this image of the academic professional were these:

- Research is the central professional endeavor and the focus of academic life.
- Quality is preserved in the academic profession through peer review and the maintenance of professional autonomy.
- The pursuit of knowledge is best organized according to discipline (and, as a consequence, disciplinarily-based departmental structures).
- The distinctive task of the academic profession is the pursuit of cognitive truth (“cognitive rationality”).
- The pursuit of knowledge is for its own sake.
- Reputations are established through national and international professional associations.
- Professional rewards and mobility accrue to those who persistently accentuate their specializations.

The academic professional model and the interrelated complex of assumptions on which it was built contributed to the extraordinary advancement of knowledge. The increased specialization, the new levels of funding for research, and the rigorous exchange and critique of professional peers produced undeniable benefits. These interrelated elements were woven into a fabric of consensus that became the assumptive world into which the large number of new PhD’s from the rapidly expanded graduate schools were initiated. The men and women who were in graduate school during those expansionist days now form the majority of faculty in mid-career in the colleges and universities across the nation struggling with the problems of steady-state staffing, or worse, retrenchment.

The academic professional model is being questioned here not

because it is inappropriate in itself, but because it contributed to a view of the academic career that is one dimensional and continues to be normative for the majority of faculty regardless of the type of institution in which they work. The model is having an especially debilitating affect on higher education because it is becoming a major stumbling block in efforts to adapt constructively to the profound social, economic and political changes confronting colleges and universities in these difficult times.

As faculty members look toward what is at best an ambiguous future, they cling tenaciously to that established professional model internalized so thoroughly during graduate school days. Rather than look for new ways of dealing with the difficult problems confronting higher education or responding to opportunities for renewal or even new career options, they accentuate and narrow further that older established career path. In times of stress we choose the familiar.

In retrenching institutions, the academic professional model is being used to rationalize very difficult and often arbitrary judgments. In some institutions in distress it is being invoked as an anesthesia in the management of pain.

It is somehow ironic that the programmatic areas that could provide new sources of institutional vitality over the next decade are precisely those areas where if faculty get involved, given the dominant professional model, they run the risk of being declassed professionally. To become involved in programs for the adult learner, interdisciplinary studies, or even general education, is to take on a kind of second class citizenship—to move toward the margins of the profession.

In this difficult period in higher education, it is important that the notion of what it means to be professional be systematically and thoughtfully reassessed rather than disregarded. Much that is being done in some of the new areas of potential growth is crudely entrepreneurial. There is little concern for quality and questions of professional responsibility are seldom raised. Even the "independent scholar" (those engaged in scholarly pursuits outside academic settings) needs a professional ethic.

Called for in the days ahead is not simply "more professional development," but a re-examination of the nature and structure of

faculty careers and what it means to be professional. I am reminded of the statement of an English professor from a large state university who was a part of my study of Danforth Fellows in mid-career. He said: "My profession seems to me to have floundered, to have lost faith in its old models and to be unable to find new ones. Having lost the common ground that should nourish us, each individual has to invent his profession for himself." Surely there is a viable middle ground between a one-dimensional model that is normative for all and each one inventing the profession for him or herself.

In reviewing the historic changes over the past two decades in higher education, Clark Kerr points out that the bulk of that monumental growth was absorbed, not by the research universities where the academic professional model is most appropriate, but by the rest of the system. In fact, the percentage of all enrollments in the Research Universities I (1976, Carnegie classification) actually fell between 1960 and 1980 from nearly 20 to below 10 percent. Over 90 percent of the growth has been in institutions where the academic professional model is only marginally appropriate, if at all. And yet, most faculty measure their success as professionals by that model. This mismatch between ideal and working realities is a tragedy of no mean proportion.

A Generative Faculty: Doing and Caring

According to Erik Erikson, the central developmental task for people in middle adulthood is the struggle with "generativity versus stagnation." This is the stage in life when the bulk of our faculty are at present. There are many ways to be generative with our lives and careers. Providing faculty with opportunities to grow and change in these years of steady-state staffing and retrenchment is now the major challenge in the field of faculty development.

Let me conclude by pointing to two areas of challenge for faculty that deserve attention in the days ahead. Generativity, for Erikson, has two sides. The first and most obvious relates to productivity—doing and making; the other has to do with caring. The two areas of new challenge for faculty on which I want to elaborate (among the many that need attending to) address these two aspects of generativity.

First, faculty need to develop a new appreciation for and involve-

ment in the world beyond the campus. I always cringe when someone refers to that external world as the “world of work,” or worse, the “real world.” The descriptions depict the problem.

During the expansionist days, faculty lost connection with larger societal purposes. The disconnectedness had a lot to do with the rapidity of growth, high levels of specialization, and the estrangement of the 1960s. It was also a reflection of the incredible opportunities in higher education. Some mid-career faculty have not been off-campus since kindergarten. For them, that other world is a thing apart. There is a developmental need to re-establish that connection, that wider sense of belonging, of being generative in society. We need to return to the older notion of vocation as calling.

The walls between college and that external world need to become more permeable, without losing what is distinctive about participation in a scholarly tradition. There needs to be more openness to the exploration of alternative careers. Faculty are now too threatened by that topic, if it is raised within the context of one’s own institution. Alternative career programs, at least for the time being, need to be housed in an external agency or sponsored by a consortium. Also, there needs to be new respect for the independent scholar. Their work and their number are becoming increasingly significant.

As we think about the kinds of faculty members that will be needed in the coming years, a second challenge looms large. This challenge addresses the other side of generativity—the need to care. It is becoming increasingly important that faculty take a developmental approach to student learning. Most faculty know very little about how students learn and are confident that they are not missing much. Yet, when faculty are exposed to the work of William Perry, for instance, they are very responsive. The discovery of how students “make meaning” out of what we do and say in the classroom is fascinating to faculty.

Perry’s work on the cognitive and ethical development of students is seen as intellectually substantive and can be immediately illuminating. The same can be said of David Kolb’s inquiry into learning styles.

A major factor in the wide-spread discouragement of faculty these days is that the students have changed. They are not, on the average, as well prepared as we were as undergraduates. And, they are different. In my own section of the country, California, there is the possibility

that by the end of the next decade the majority of the population will be non-Caucasian. Given the political and ethical commitments of most faculty, we are getting what we asked for: a genuinely pluralistic society that takes higher education seriously, that moves disadvantaged groups into higher education in increasingly larger numbers. The challenge of the underprepared student is one that faculty and those concerned with faculty development have yet to take up in a serious way.

The academic profession is at a turning point. We can continue to perpetuate the familiar, the cultural hegemony of a one-dimensional model from an earlier time; or we can move toward an understanding of the profession that is genuinely multi-dimensional, that builds out of the difficult conditions we now face new sources of vitality and renewal. Ways must be found to release the incredible imagination, curiosity, creativity, and commitments of our colleagues—the most talented of a generation. Only then can we ensure that the generations ahead will be well-served.

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