

Against professionalism in the academy

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One effect of the increasing professionalization of the academy is to incline university professors toward careerism. Unfortunately, since careerist professors are less interesting than their more free-wheeling colleagues, the professionalization of the academy cannot but diminish the cultural significance of the university.

Being a university professor might well be a calling. Certainly, though, it is a job. Professors are employees, and the universities at which they work are their employers. As employees, professors have an interest in pay, working conditions, job security, and the rest; as employers, universities have an interest in getting value for the money they pay professors.

You might have heard about what is sometimes called “the tripod”: research, teaching, and service. The professors and the universities, in times long gone, decided that these would be the three areas of the professor’s job. Except in extremely rare cases, a professor is contractually obligated to conduct research, teach students, and contribute to the wellbeing of academic life, and to do each of the three well. When a professor applies for tenure or promotion, he or she will be evaluated on the strength of his or her research, teaching, and service.

Now that’s all fine, and, indeed, it’s hard to see how it could be otherwise. Professors and universities alike have good reason to want to put down in writing just what they expect of each other, and just what they are entitled to. Too much is at stake in decisions about tenure or promotion for the Collective Agreement or whatever to fail to describe what’s to be evaluated and to specify standards.

Yet it is just as important that the Collective Agreement doesn’t say too much about what falls under the three headings and doesn’t specify standards too precisely. If a university is to be a place of intellectual discovery and excitement, we must not close off potential avenues by insisting that people travel only on the ones already open. We professors want the freedom to investigate and interpret what we ourselves judge merits investigation or interpretation, and we want the freedom to pursue our own pedagogical goals using our favoured means. We also want the freedom to determine for ourselves where our talents for service can most fruitfully be spent. Of course, these freedoms do not isolate us from criticism. On the contrary, we are delighted when we attract a critical response, or at least we should be. Nothing lets a professor know better that her academic efforts have not been in vain than for them to be the target of a thoughtful critique.

So how, then, do professionalization and careerism threaten to make our universities dull? Well, professionalization inevitably involves the replacement of judgement by criteria. When a group is other than professional, its members will apply standards of quality to that

which they evaluate, and they will apply their own particular and, perhaps, idiosyncratic standards. Non-professionals are concerned with whether the thing they are evaluating is any good, any good along the lines they themselves as individuals prefer. Where a group is professional, though, its members look for common criteria, and common criteria are possible only by abstracting away from quality. Professionals evaluate by putting things into categories, and counting and weighing them.

We can see the tendency to exchange quality for quantity by looking to the hiring, tenure, and promotion procedures and committees in Canadian universities today. How many publications and in what journals? How often cited? What's the rating on the student evaluations? How well known are the candidate's referees? How many Senate committees did she sit on? If these are the questions that their evaluators will be asking, then a career-minded candidate will try to supply the proper answers to them, whether that's best for the university and the society around it or not.

What we should be asking, of course, for the sake of our universities and their most honourable functions in society, is how good her research is, how good her teaching is, and how good her contributions to the university are. Professors should be bringing standards of quality (their own, of course) to bear on each candidate's dossier, not going down a quantitative checklist.

One criticism of what I've been saying is that the counting I'm disparaging is actually a sound way to measure quality. Part of what makes a researcher good, though of course only a part, is that she is publishing regularly or often. So counting publications isn't irrelevant from the point of view of qualitative evaluation. Moreover, that she publishes in good journals indicates that her work is good. Her averages on student evaluations summarize judgements of quality. Well known referees.... And so on.

Good journals publish bad papers and bad journals occasionally publish good papers. We can't tell just from the name of the journal whether the paper is any good. And who knows what student evaluations measure? If we want to form a proper opinion we have to work through the academic papers, the popular writings, the course syllabi, and whatever other evidence we have—for ourselves.

A second criticism is that opinions are just what we should be getting away from. There are two reasons why. One is fairness to the candidate. The other is the public standing of the profession. Both are attainable only through consistency, and a range of personal opinion is the enemy of consistency. What we need, then, are objective professional standards, standards to be included in our Collective Agreements.

It's in these commitments that we can most clearly see the threat to our mission as scholars, scientists, intellectuals, and teachers. What we do is most significant when it expresses our individuality and enables others, our students, primarily, to construct their own individuality. Professional standards and careerism are the death of individuality, and thus destructive of our mission.