

Professors as Professionals: Disinterested and Accountable?

A Submission from Paul Shaker, PhD to
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Introduction

Faculty may observe that other professions in Canada and elsewhere are subject to continual public and media attention with respect to a spectrum of issues. For example, do teachers have the right to refuse to administer tests that they allege are damaging to students? Should nurses found to be substance abusers away from their place of employment be subject to public outing? Must pharmacists dispense the "morning after pill" even if they find it morally objectionable? The professions' self-regulating bodies deal with a continuing flow of controversies such as these while our parallel debates, as professors, are largely conducted behind closed doors and on a case-by-case, institution-by-institution level. Some claim we have earned this privilege through our ancient and effective systems of control. Others assert that our work is not of such life and death consequence as to require more developed monitoring. In all, the idiosyncrasies of professor as profession lead one to consider what is gained and what is lost by our peculiar position and relative autonomy in society. Let us consider where we stand with respect to a few salient attributes of professionals...

The Challenge of Altruism

Research

A primary characteristic of professions is advocacy for and unselfish service to our audiences. Caveat emptor should not characterize the relationship of professionals with those who come to them for services. Do we as faculty appropriately put the interests of others ahead of our own? Do we demonstrate sufficient altruism? On one level it is not obvious whether the interested others are a global community of researchers, our students, or the citizens whose tax dollars support our institutions. Ultimately none of these audiences can be excluded, but the broader the client base, the more difficult evaluation becomes. Claims that we are contributing to the pursuit of knowledge in our field have high face validity in the internet age if we are publishing and presenting in plausible outlets. Also, compared to other fields of evaluation, our universities are generally most adept at parsing how effective contributions of this type are. To claim that this area of evaluation is our strongest may not, however, be an assertion of high significance. The possibility exists that in many cases we have gamed the system, or stacked the deck to our own benefit and clouded the process of identifying meritorious research. We may also undervalue local and applied research, perhaps to the detriment of our cities and province. Prof. Budd Hall, Director of University of Victoria's Community-Based Research says, "With a small shift of the gaze of our university toward...issues our

community names, we think we could have quite a big impact on the quality of life in our community" (2009).

We know our evaluation methods have their weaknesses. The referee process as applied to tenure and promotion, for example, may be our most intensive form of peer review. At the same time, freedom of information legislation and institutional interpretations of FOI may dictate that referee selection is controlled by candidates, and limited to ever decreasing pools of qualified reviewers. Conflicts of interest become difficult to avoid in a web of academics whose roles and relationships overlap. Straightforward critique becomes an endangered species, too, in this small, public and litigious environment. Negative reviews become difficult to find whether they are merited or not.

This same web of interlocking interests affects the process of refereeing publications. Differentiating the trading of favours from objective review is a task akin to plumbing the depths of human motivation. The well-intentioned evaluator has entered a hall of mirrors when we pair the reading of motive with complexity stemming from the proliferation of publications—print and electronic—and their uncertain pretensions of quality. Citation databases and indices of impact have evolved to address this challenge, but such instruments vary greatly in their validity by discipline, and, of course, they do not treat many media, including, most famously, books. Also, like Google, such indicators are not proof from being gamed.

The salary review process further complicates the problem of adjudicating merit in research because of the volume of evaluation it entails. Here we walk a line on which we are looking to objectively judge performance while trying to avoid pitfalls such as favoritism and bias on the one hand, and vacuous bean counting and formalism on the other. The sheer amount of material that begs for evaluation daunts those charged with determining merit pay for every faculty member every year or two. As a result we are tempted to fall back on "weighing" vitas, counting titles, scanning articles, and crediting paper presentations for which no paper has been produced. Again, all the afore-mentioned ambiguity is in the area of performance to which we typically give the greatest attention—research--and would claim the most accurate results.

Service

More problematic are the other opportunities for our unselfish service to others. One example would be our contribution to the political order. As highly educated and well-compensated professionals, it is reasonable to expect we, as a group ought to be exemplary citizens. Criteria that would reflect this are our voting rates, our participation in

civic life, our record of abiding by the laws and working to renew them, our philanthropy and volunteerism. We command expertise and communication skills critical to advancing dialogue and action on initiatives that promote social renewal. It is noteworthy that recently controversy regarding climate change and the teaching of intelligent design has stirred some organizations of scientists to enter the public forum in defense of their consensus point of view. Their engagement was late but welcome. The Canadian Association of University Teachers' Academic Freedom Fund may be another effective venture by faculty.

The BC Teachers Federation offers a case in point of a broad type of organizational activism, not in its well-known advocacy for the profession of teaching, but in the heavy investment it makes each year from member dues to promote advances in addressing poverty, child and youth issues, race relations, gender equity, homophobia and heterosexism, bullying, environmental issues, globalization, Aboriginal education and violence prevention. The expenditures well exceed one million dollars annually. The legacy of these initiatives has been encouraging although they directly benefit BCTF only in the sense that group altruism provides a positive, unifying spirit for the organization and in this way advances the profession in a subtle, long-term fashion. Such a commitment to going beyond direct self-interest and engaging political and social issues for the good of humankind and the environment is inspirational.

Teaching

Ultimately, however, our immediate and personal audience is our students. Professional responsibility would suggest we carefully provide our students with a liberal education that opens the life of the mind by engaging them with the modes of inquiry or disciplines in increasingly challenging and fruitful ways. More broadly we should require a general education that prepares one for the health and economic challenges of modern society. As with other professionals we should help protect our students from financial exploitation and ruinous debt. Our students deserve to be seen holistically, and not through the lens of academic achievement alone.

Realistically, however, serving such student priorities is in constant tension with our own self-interest. Teaching what we wish to teach, when we wish to be in the classroom is often at odds with forming relevant curriculum in general education for students who typically do not know what would most benefit them and are pressed by immediate economic concerns to accept whatever is presented to them. Also relevant is whether we deliver instruction ourselves, or closely supervise our corps of instructors, as opposed to walking away from these areas of undergraduate teaching and simply leaving the

responsibility to others. We have tended to create a cafeteria design for liberal education that is driven by departmental craving for a share of the budget. Popularly justified as giving students "choice," this approach ducks the difficult issue of identifying and delivering a focused, common curriculum that is infused with our primary societal values and the means to achieve them through arts and science knowledge. We too often follow disciplinary lines rather than modes of inquiry and do not make a point to identify the limitations of our paradigms, thereby leaving many graduates with an incoherent and superficial introduction to the breadth and parameters of inquiry.

Economically we have prospered relative to most in society over the past forty years while watching government support to universities decline and tuitions rise. (The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that Canada "has a reputation for paying full-time faculty members well... Starting salaries in Canadian higher education are the highest in the world" (2009). Loans have increased exponentially as have the hours students dedicate to employment to pay for university. As a profession we have been notably quiescent through this process. In the United States the sorry transfer of student loans to expensive private lenders who traded favours with the universities exemplified this process of exploitation of the young. As a profession and through our organizations we are little heard from as economic advocates for our students.

The Challenge of Accountability

Professionals have an obligation to maintain currency and effectiveness in their area of expertise. Do we monitor the continuing quality of our knowledge of our fields and our performance in instruction? Can we make a convincing case that we return to society value equivalent to the resources we consume? Taxpayers and tuition payers are posing challenges such as these with increasing impact. The public schools have been caught in a similar accountability debate for decades and their effectiveness has been defined in the minds of many by their rankings on standardized tests that are both provincial and international. In British Columbia hospitals are now subject to similar examination. Higher education has not been similarly scrutinized although our situation is not without potential to follow a parallel course. In the USA former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings assembled a prestigious commission that reported among other findings in 2008, "Higher education institutions should measure student learning using quality-assessment data from instruments such as, for example, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which measures the growth of student learning taking place in colleges, and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, which is designed to assess general education outcomes for undergraduates in order to improve the quality of instruction and learning."

The report continues, "The results of student learning assessments, including value-added measurements that indicate how students' skills have improved over time, should be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly" ("A test of leadership," 2006).

The resistance of a number of Canada's universities to Maclean's rankings was a recent response to such pressures and not without good reason. "League tables" that rank schools and universities are potent tools for shaping public opinion and create "collateral damage" by affecting decisions made in the system for the sake of directly raising indicators such as rankings rather than improving appropriate outputs such as an educated graduating class. An example of this type of corrupting effect occurred when one of our BC universities was revealed in FOI documents to be strategizing on whether to list lessened room capacities. The ranking-driven intent was that class sizes could be reduced without students who were in need of those seats having accurate information on which to base a protest. Campbell's Law, "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" speaks to this point (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). [This type of analytical insight, based in disciplinary knowledge and awareness of the uses of theory, derives from a quality liberal education as was described above.]

As professionals we should be more concerned than the public at large about our professional development, currency, and teaching effectiveness. If such is to be achieved our systems of monitoring these areas of performance must be exemplary. As a model, the American Board of Medical Specialties may merit emulation in continuing education. Not only does board recertification require retesting every six to ten years, but also professional development must be done in accredited settings, controlled by the 24 member boards. Contrast this with the hit or miss indicators we have of faculty currency. (In Canada revalidation of physicians is based on continuous professional development and not recertification examinations.) There is no question that many faculty demonstrate cutting edge disciplinary competence, but what about others down the scale? An example of a process that would address this quality marker is that rank not be permanent; that periodically we should defend our right to full professorship by evidence that demonstrates our state of being current in our field. Such an approach is not without precedent: some universities have a similar process with respect to membership in the graduate faculty whereby ongoing evidence of research effectiveness is required to maintain the right to mentor. If, by having weak monitoring, we tempt colleagues to coast through a segment of their careers we have done a disservice to our institutions and

ourselves. Few persons thrive in a work environment that lacks an appropriate level of challenge or in which "anything goes."

Living up to our responsibility as instructors would seem to be a manageable task, but often we end up concluding that "everyone is above average." Student evaluations have come to be central in this process, and, within such evaluations, numerical rating scales prevail. Sometimes these rating scales are used exclusive of written comments that in the minds of some faculty can be too prejudicial if their thrust is negative. (When I first heard this rationale, my reaction was to imagine court cases in which the jury heard only the defense! My other reaction was wonder at the low opinion some faculty had of the analytic powers of their peers.) In addition, documented visits by peers may be a part of the process and these may generate written comments and/or numeric ratings. Portfolios are a more recent addition to the mix and offer promise. As with identifying outstanding researchers, we probably do better with validating excellence than we do with putting a halt to incompetence and mediocrity. Given that students are sympathetic markers and typically use only the upper half of rating scales, it is unlikely that those ranked at the bottom feel much heat or impetus to change. At one point in my career I was in dialogue with a professor who was content with an [apparently impressive] 88% teaching evaluation score. The professor was less pleased to be informed that this was second lowest among 120 colleagues. We need to ask ourselves whether we take our teaching seriously enough to intervene with even the weakest of our instructors. If we do not we are inviting consequences with which we shall not be pleased. These include not only government monitoring, but on the other hand a general collapse of public respect for quality in teaching and more movement to alternative higher education, online instruction, and for-profit purveyors.

Looking Forward

What might our professional aspirations be in these areas as we look forward? Truly close evaluation of faculty on a continual basis is probably beyond our resources. The abundance of reviews we have mandated and their pretension of ranking individual performance in finely discriminated steps dictates compromise, gamesmanship, and dissembling. Fewer, broader reviews with more meaningful stakes and remediation processes would yield more salutary effects. In other words, the resources we have to evaluate one another would be better spent in identifying those who must improve rather than parsing the very good from the excellent. In the process we might strike a better balance between competitiveness and common purpose.

Among those common purposes should be a more public, integral commitment to our society. We are privileged professionals who are on the margins politically at great cost to others and ourselves. If with all our intellectual accomplishment we have not found our way to social conscience, then it is our—not our students'—liberal education that has proven defective. Ironically, this type of active compassion for others is also liberating for one's self. Given the great freedom and autonomy of our profession, our obligation is to demonstrate that enlightened self-interest assumes our common interest.

Appendix I - Profiles in Professorship

When he was in his mid-thirties, a senior colleague of mine was called to the university in a leadership role that brought with it full professor status. After a decade of administrative service, he assumed a faculty role and pursued his career in an unconventional manner. Although prior evidence indicated he could have placed a conventional emphasis on research and scholarship, he instead focused for the next twenty years on graduate mentoring. The merit pay process penalized him for his choice, but scores of graduate students saw him as central to their development and celebrate his work to the present day. During his twenty-five year retirement he continually received expressions of gratitude and witnessed copious evidence of the good work his students had done.

As a relative was nearing graduation from his university, I spent an afternoon with her undergraduate advisor. Over the course of his career, this senior professor had deferred some of his scholarly productivity in order to be a leader in campus governance. As we walked the grounds and talked about the university, I heard of the student aid and services, the organizations, and the facilities that were created or enhanced through his perseverance and creativity. The record was impressive in scope and uplifting in humanistic terms. The university seemed so much better an institution for his efforts. He had contributed to knowledge in his field, but, equally rewarding, was the institutional legacy he was leaving his university. We closed the day at his home where students were gathering.

As an undergraduate a professor came into my life who offered inspired teaching in social theory at a time when nothing could have better served me. Beyond the content of her curriculum was her evident love of learning and commitment to the examined life. Like many young people, I needed to have external evidence that my own appreciation of such values had a place in the adult world and was not, as some in my family would suggest, an escape from the "real world" and a path to irrelevance and failure. My professor went on to a full career at the university—we remain in touch today. She focused on teaching, including the undergraduate honours program, and other ways of affecting the curriculum at large. Countless students benefited from experiencing her exemplary classroom.

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Bio

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