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The Value of Academic Societies

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To the Editor:

Herb Childress advises faculty on concrete steps they can and should take to improve the current situation of adjuncts and to advocate for more tenure-line jobs (“What Tenured Faculty Could Do, If They Cared About Adjuncts” *The Chronicle Review*, October 28). Several of his recommendations are spot on. Faculty must stay in contact with their doctoral students after the PhD – not only for statistics’ sake but for the human reason that these students have devoted five or more years of their lives to learning, usually in the hope of joining their teachers’ ranks. Whatever path they pursue, they have won a place in the academic community and deserve attention and respect.

Childress is also correct to recommend that faculty review their finances and sideline some customs in favor of practices that better represent strong academic values. For example: schools spend thousands each year to pay scholars to fly hundreds of miles to deliver departmental talks to audiences as small as ten people. Surely in this age of climate crisis, interdisciplinarity, and collaborative research, we can devise better ways to circulate knowledge.

But I take issue with Childress’s call on faculty to cut institutional memberships, which he reduces to “a disciplinary accreditation that nobody really cares about.” The organizations that make up the American Council of Learned Societies are crucially important agents for change in American higher education.

Academic societies (“learned societies” in the old parlance of our name) are horizontally networked groups that circulate knowledge, advance reform movements, and connect people around and through the silos of individual schools. Society directors work hard to keep conference costs low and their boards focused on the most vulnerable members of the profession. Well organized society meetings are a rare

opportunity for people from different types of schools to mingle – an important experience for well-supported graduate students ignorant of the challenges of working at a community college or an under-resourced school.

While university administrators are constrained by local institutional perspectives when confronting the post-PhD employment crisis, many societies have asked recent PhDs what the broad community of scholars can do to help. Society leaders have set up advising resources, professionalization support, non-academic job fairs, and more. Through awards, events, and sponsored activities, societies raise the profile of scholarship and invite the non-academic public to join in the creation of knowledge. Regional societies often work closely with local communities, including high school teachers who tend to feel shut out from the world of research.

Colleges and universities are vertical institutions with diverse constituencies – tuition-paying students and parents, faculty, administrators, trustees and/or state legislatures – whose interests regularly conflict. Change is not impossible in these institutions, but it is slow. Because schools compete for dollars and status, improvements at one school are not easily transferred to others. And the rising inequality in this country has hit higher education hard, giving faculty at rich universities more time, money, and influence, and making partnerships with faculty at poorer universities difficult and fraught.

Societies are leaders in higher education today. They have the potential to be even more powerful engines of change in the future. Now is the moment for tenured faculty to support their societies – and if they are not working toward desirable ends, to get involved. Large-scale change will not arise from individual schools but from the human collectives that societies create and bring together.

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