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A Matter of Mutual Support

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American Council of Learned Societies

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Introduction

This Occasional Paper originated in a lunchtime address by Francis Oakley, Chair of the ACLS Board of Directors, at the ACLS Annual Meeting on April 29, 1995.

Over the last decade, the American Council of Learned Societies has added a programmatic focus on issues of teaching, learning, and education to its long-standing activities in support of scholarship and research. A 1991 Occasional Paper on *The Improvement of Teaching*, by Derek Bok, then President of Harvard University, has received wide circulation and comment. Over the past three years, ACLS has conducted a national project to improve humanities education in the schools by fostering collaborative projects between school teachers and university faculty. At the heart of this project has been an effort to support sustained scholarly interests on the part of school teachers in a manner which furthers both curriculum development and professional development of teachers.

In this Occasional Paper, Francis Oakley, Edward Dorr Griffin Professor of the History of Ideas at Williams College and President Emeritus of the College, considers the charges that have been levelled at higher education alleging a “retreat from teaching” on the part of faculty, and suggesting that excessive interest in scholarship is partly to blame for the putative educational failings of colleges and universities. To a debate which has been dominated by anecdotes, he contributes a review of evidence that suggests these criticisms may not just be exaggerated, but fail to understand how good scholarship nurtures good teaching.

The ACLS is pleased to bring these reflections on the relationship of research and teaching—how the two may mutually support one another—to a wider audience.

A few months ago, I had occasion to re-read some of the writings of the Irish philosopher, Bishop Berkeley, and there came irresistibly to mind two limericks by Ronald Knox which I had memorized as an undergraduate. With their help, I had found, one need encounter no difficulty in recalling the nature of Berkeley's teaching on the relationship between existence and perception—a teaching often, if inadequately, summed up in the formula *esse est percipi*, “to be is to be perceived.” The first of these limericks goes as follows:

There was a young man who said: “God
Must find it extremely odd,
When he sees that this tree
Continues to be,
When there's no one about in the quad.”

And the reply:

“Dear Sir, Your astonishment's odd,
I am always about in the quad.
And that's why this tree
Continues to be,
Since observed by, Yours faithfully, God.”

Now I mention these things, not simply to get your attention (though that itself is a not unworthy goal), but also because I am struck by the degree to which we are prone, in the world of the academy, to a sort of reverse Berkeleyism. For us, that is to say, and all too often, to be perceived is to be. I learned as an administrator to dread the moment when a faculty member would embark on the expression of some concern by saying: “It is perceived that....” I had long since absorbed the lesson that there was simply no point in insisting that somebody really ought to take authorial responsibility for the perception in question. Nor would it help to splutter indignantly that that perception bore no relation to any verifiable external reality. The latter point, indeed, would almost invariably be conceded, and the advice, concern, exhortation, complaint swiftly modulated into a focus on the need to address the perception itself.

Of course, the trouble about that is that we in the academy appear to be enormously energetic and creative perceivers, and too swift and gratifying a response can have the undesired effect of stimulating the flow of those creative juices. So, before responding to the alleged need, a moment of judgment is called for. Nonetheless, if that judgment is

sound, it will at least periodically determine that the advice to address the perception is, in fact, good advice. Certainly, it is advice I propose to take in the time available to me today. And the perception I wish to address, one stubbornly rooted, it would seem, in the mind of the larger public (or, at least, of the segment of the public concerned with such things), is the perception that when it comes to our commitment in the academy to teaching and research, something of a zero-sum game is involved. Or, put more harshly, that there is an “inescapable incompatibility ... [between] ... the demands of teaching and research” (Barnett A40).

A dreary old topic, I well realize, but it is one deeply and damagingly embedded in the current national debate about higher education and the allocation of resources to higher education. And surely, if I may invoke the theme chosen for the ACLS Delegates’ Meeting, among the obligations we do have to the larger public “beyond the boundaries of the academy” is that of *explaining ourselves*, of conveying on this matter, then, an accurate picture of the way in which we ourselves allocate our time, energies, and resources, as well as the reasons underlying the particular balance struck in the allocation between teaching and research. But, in order to do that, we ourselves have to be clear about the issue. And I am not sure that we are. I drew the harsh formulation I used earlier from an Op-ed piece written by an academic that appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* just three years ago. And the assumption that there is, indeed, a zero-sum game involved in the commitment respectively to teaching and research appeared to underlie the position adopted by a faculty contributor to an ACLS panel on teaching a year earlier (see Grider), as also the rather flip faculty testimony foregrounded by Leslie Stahl in a quite damaging 1995 episode of *60 Minutes* devoted to the same topic.

On this issue, some of us, doubtless, have horror stories to relate. Such stories, certainly have found an honored place in the potpourri of disheveled anecdotage that such critics of contemporary American education as Martin Anderson, Lynne Cheney, Page Smith, and Charles Sykes have on this, as on other related matters, substituted for any real attempt, however critical, to come to terms with what we actually know about this particular issue. What do I have in mind? Well, their formulations of course vary, but at their harshest the claims such critics are prone to making are clear enough, and they are threefold.

First, that despite (or because of) the great emphasis that the university community places upon research, and the mounting surge of publications resulting therefrom, much of what is produced is trivial, dull, pedestrian, or esoteric (or, God forbid! some mind-numbing

combination of all four). As Martin Anderson puts it, with characteristic understatement, in his book, *Impostors in the Temple*, “academic writing and research” constitutes “the greatest intellectual fraud of the twentieth century” (85, 103-6, 112). Or, as Sykes puts it in *ProfScam* (he with characteristic delicacy), “It is not necessary to insist that *no* worthwhile or valuable research is being done at the universities to recognize that much of what passes for knowledge creation makes only the most piddling contribution to the pool of human wisdom. Much of it is merely humbug” (103).

Second, that things used once to be otherwise; that academics, in the frantic attempt to mount their overpriced and oversold research effort, have come increasingly to discharge their teaching responsibilities less conscientiously and less effectively than in the past. The precise past chosen varies from critic to critic, but whatever the particular choice made, the underlying and unquestioned assumption is that the academy, in our current age of iron, carries in the innermost recesses of its blemished soul, the stigmata of some great, past fall from grace.

Third, that one of the distinguishing features of our current era is the distressing degree to which teaching is undervalued in the world of higher education; that the American professoriate (to quote Sykes again) is in full “flight from teaching”; that “the academic culture is not merely indifferent to teaching, [but] is actively hostile to it;” that “in the modern university,” indeed, “no act of good teaching goes unpunished” (54). All of this, I might add, in a chapter entitled (in case the point might somehow have eluded the reader) — all of this in a chapter entitled “The Crucifixion of Teaching.”

Caught up in these charges, which are combined and recombined in varying ways, are several distinct strands, on only one of which can I focus today: namely, the widespread conviction that the academy vastly overemphasizes research and accordingly, as a necessary concomitant, undervalues teaching. And I want to focus on this specifically, because here the reliance on tiresomely recycled anecdote is particularly puzzling, in that for the period from the late 1960s to 1994 we have at our disposal quite rich sets of survey data concerning the attitude of faculty towards teaching and research; time devoted to these and related activities; research productivity as measured by the publication of articles, monographs and books; and, most recently and revealingly, even some data concerning the correlation in our leading liberal arts colleges between scholarship and the effectiveness of teaching performance. Although these data have been analyzed and added to by such scholars as Howard Bowen, Jack Schuster, Oliver Fulton, Martin Trow, Everett Carl Ladd, Seymour Martin Lipset and, most recently, Robert

McCaughey, they have largely been ignored by those alleging the occurrence in the academy of a flight from teaching. And yet they have a great deal to tell us about the subject, most of it, moreover, tending to reshape the issue along more complex lines, rendering it less rewarding material for those characteristically energized by the joys of polemic. On this matter the most helpful sets of data are those generated by the Carnegie surveys of faculty attitudes and behavior conducted at intervals since 1969 and most recently, I believe, in 1989. And they have been subjected to careful professional scrutiny—most revealingly by Trow and Fulton who published in the mid-1970s an intriguing analysis of the 1969 data (39-83). In so doing, they extracted from those data a series of conclusions that would not have startled earlier researchers on the subject (cf. Parsons and Platt), but might well surprise some academics themselves, and should certainly serve to reassure observers outside the academy whose views about faculty attitudes toward teaching have been formed by the sensationalist charges advanced by commentators like Anderson, Sykes, Cheney, and Smith.

Naturally, a great diversity of attitudes is evident across the various institutional sectors into which the academy is divided, from our leading research universities to our community colleges. That notwithstanding, it is surprising, first, that 77 percent of faculty overall indicated in 1969 that their primary interest lay in teaching, and 50 percent of those at the high quality universities did likewise. “Even at the largest state universities ...,” Trow and Fulton observe, “where for years the doctrine of ‘publish or perish’, large semiautonomous research ‘empires,’ excessive student numbers, and poor faculty-student ratios have been criticized, only a very small minority of faculty are uninterested in teaching, while half the total faculty claims to be more interested in teaching than research.” Hence they conclude that “judged by the staff’s self-conceptions, the American academic system as a whole is primarily a teaching system. Any notion that teaching generally takes second place to research is certainly not borne out” (Trow and Fulton 42-45, Table 2-2).¹

If, moreover, and in the second place, one takes a further step and works into the picture actual research productivity as measured by publication activity, the picture that emerges is broadly congruent with what faculty members themselves reported about the primary focus of their interests. Fifty-three percent overall appear to have been inactive in research—with the figure even for our leading research universities being as much as 21 percent. Trow and Fulton did feel, however, and in the third place, that there is something of a division between so-called “research” and “teaching” institutions. But it lies, not between the universities with a substantial commitment to graduate and professional

education and the four- and two-year undergraduate colleges. Rather, it lies between the universities and top tier of four-year colleges on the one hand, and the less highly selective four- and two-year colleges on the other. On this, they note, as on other matters, a veritable “fault-line” runs between what they call the “high quality” four-year colleges and the rest, with those “high quality” colleges showing “levels of research activity by their regular staff that in sheer rate of publication are close to those of the lesser universities, and markedly higher than those of the great majority of four- and two-year colleges” (Trow and Fulton 49n13, 74, 79).

Given the fact that these leading undergraduate colleges are celebrated (and justifiably so) for the intensity of their commitment to undergraduate teaching and the importance they attach to successful teaching performance in their appointment, reappointment, and promotion decisions,² this particular finding naturally led Trow and Fulton to a final set of questions pertaining to the relationship of research to teaching and other professional commitments in those universities and colleges where most of the research was being done. And here (still analyzing the 1969 Carnegie data) they found that those faculty who published most frequently were “not much more likely to discourage undergraduates from seeing them outside office hours; and scarcely less likely to see undergraduates informally.” At the leading research universities, indeed, there was “surprisingly little difference between researchers and non-researchers in their level of teaching activity” over all, and, so far as governance and administration were concerned, the most active researchers were “much more likely [than their less active colleagues] to be involved in the administrative processes of their department and their institution” (Trow and Fulton 66-75).

The data being used, of course, speak to the *quality* of that teaching or administrative work no more than they do to the quality of the research being accomplished. But they do suggest that one should not simply assume that some sort of zero-sum game is necessarily involved. The common view that a heavy commitment to research is *necessarily* bought at the price of reduced attention to teaching and other institutional service is clearly not warranted. In aggregate, at least, it does not appear to be true of highly productive scholars at our leading research universities. Such people seem to do more of everything, and the crucial variable may well be, not differing interests or priorities but differential levels of energy.

Trow and Fulton noted that their basic conclusions concerning the comparatively favorable climate for teaching prevailing in American higher education were consistent with independent findings reported by others in the mid-1960s. And they were consistent also with the data

generated by the 1989 Carnegie survey. These more recent data do reveal something of a shift over the previous 20 years in a research-oriented direction, but that may conceivably (or partly) reflect the fact that whereas the 1989 data were based on the responses of full-time faculty members alone, the 1969 data reflected the views and behavior of part-timers too (see Oakley 201n71). Even so, the general picture is not dissimilar to that painted earlier on by Trow and Fulton, and it is congruent also with that sketched in 1979 by Everett Carl Ladd on the basis both of the Carnegie data and of independent surveys which he and Lipset had conducted in 1977 and 1979. With only 7 percent of the American professoriate indicating in those surveys that their interests lay heavily in research, and with less than one-fourth publishing extensively (i.e. defined as 20 or more articles or three or more monographs), he concluded that “[m]ost college and university professors in the United States do not think of themselves as research people. Their interests lie primarily in teaching. They spend most of their time in teaching and related activities. And a clear majority of faculty have published little or nothing” (Ladd 3-5, 7-11).³

This being so, and picking up on the data attesting to the comparatively high level of scholarly engagement evident among the faculties of the more selective of our undergraduate liberal arts colleges, Robert McCaughey, Dean of the Faculty at Barnard College, has pursued over the course of the past decade a careful, detailed, and quite probing investigation of the scholarly and teaching activities pursued by the humanities and social science faculties of some two dozen of our leading liberal arts colleges, these institutions seen as representative of a group of no more than three dozen. The results of that study were published in 1994 in a little book entitled *Scholars and Teachers*. It makes intriguing reading, and I hope that those of you who have read it will bear with me if I take this opportunity to share with everyone else some of its more striking findings.

The first and most general of these conclusions confirms the finding of Fulton and Trow to the effect that the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, by aggregating together all the liberal arts colleges, have served to obscure the comparatively high levels of scholarly engagement present in some of them. But it pushes beyond that finding by insisting that even the Carnegie Liberal Arts/Baccalaureate I category (which lumps together roughly 150 institutions) also serves to conceal the even higher level of research activity distinguishing the approximately three dozen colleges that were the focus of McCaughey’s study. At those colleges, it concludes, faculty members in the humanities and social sciences “have effected [over the course, at least, of the past

quarter-century] a partial convergence with the faculties of research universities in their professional self-identities and the level of their scholarly activities, while diverging further from faculties at other liberal arts colleges and four-year institutions generally” (McCaughey iii). While those faculty “differ from [research] university faculty in accepting that the primary mission of their employing institutions is [that of] teaching undergraduates,” they are nonetheless committed to the view that published “evidence of scholarly activity” should be necessary for the award of tenure, and *claim*, at least, to “see no contradiction between their personal identities as scholars and their institutional responsibilities to be effective undergraduate teachers” (41-42).

So far, so good. But may not such faculty respondents be engaged in an exercise in wishful thinking? McCaughey goes on to address that very possibility by resorting to external publication and scholarly citation counts for the faculty under study, and he then measures their median and mean levels of activity against that of a control group composed of over 700 full-time faculty in the same disciplines at three of our major research universities (i.e. Columbia, Princeton, and Yale). As a result of that exercise, he concludes that scholarly activity among this group of liberal arts faculty is substantially greater, both absolutely and comparatively, than has usually been assumed, on the basis of the Carnegie surveys, for liberal arts college faculty in general. Of those who have been teaching at these colleges for at least five years, 55 percent have published at least one book, and 52 percent three or more articles (McCaughey 44). Among veteran faculty members at such institutions (defined as people with Ph.D.s earned before 1986), only 13 percent were non-publishers. More than a quarter of those veterans had published two or more books, more than a third six or more articles. Taking the humanities and social science faculties of those institutions as a whole, about a quarter “perform at levels of scholarly activity typical among their colleagues at Columbia, Princeton, and Yale.” And of those, about a half “perform above those levels” (44-46).

Fine, one may say. That’s no doubt admirable. But, as alumni might well be moved to ask: “Can these people teach?” And what sort of correlation if any (positive *or* negative) exists between levels of scholarly activity and performance as teachers? Of course, that is something harder to get at. But McCaughey, undaunted by the challenge, goes on to compare the “externally-generated scholarly ratings” of the faculty included in his study with “usable local ratings of the teaching effectiveness” of those same faculty—that is to say, with the “evaluations of their individual teaching performance” generated by their home institutions (ix). And what does he report? First, that these faculty

overwhelmingly believe that their scholarly effort makes them better teachers. Second, after probing to see if that belief is actually warranted, he concludes not only that it would be incorrect to assume that scholarly commitment and teaching effectiveness are *inversely* correlated, but also that there exists among those faculty an overall correlation between scholarly engagement and teaching effectiveness that is clearly positive—that is, “positive at levels that are statistically significant.” And, further than that, that the most positive correlation occurs among faculty aged 60 and older, thereby affording substantial support to the self-reported view of some in that age-group that “their effectiveness in the classroom had been sustained—or, at least, prolonged—by their ongoing scholarly activity” (McCaughey 92-93, 103-105).

What, then, are we to make of all of this? Well, clearly, a measure of caution is called for when trying to make sense of statistical data of the type we have been discussing. Moreover, any inclination to generalize too boldly on the basis of what appears to be the situation at our leading liberal arts colleges should be chastened by the recognition that they provide an extremely privileged institutional setting for both teaching and scholarship, and constitute, after all, less than one percent of all our institutions of higher education. So there is plenty of room for argument. But time calling now for a measure of rhetorical parsimony, let me forego that, and content myself instead with suggesting a few, rather broad, conclusions.

First, and most general, that on this matter of research, teaching, and the relationship between the two, we would do well (the rush to condemnation notwithstanding) to keep our powder dry and resist the pressure to premature judgment. The issue is a far more complex one than the critics would have us believe, and we need to know a great deal more about the actual facts of the situation than those critics would appear to deem necessary. Second, that the wistful evocation of past pedagogic glories again notwithstanding, we would do well to withhold our harmonies from the melody of “downhill all the way” that the critics so seductively sound—even though it appears to have lodged itself so successfully in the pertinent pop-charts. Third, that the hackneyed theme of a flight from teaching can most fittingly be subsumed under the heading of a flight from reality. Finally, that assertions of the “inescapable incompatibility of the demands of teaching and research” should be met with a robust measure of skepticism. They are not borne out by what we do know about the behavior (at least in aggregate) of faculty teaching at our leading research universities and they come into direct collision with the truly impressive scholarly track record long since achieved by faculty teaching at our leading undergraduate liberal arts colleges, where

student expectations for teaching are enormously high, and where the institutional commitment to the central importance of good teaching has remained clear, consistent, unwavering, unambiguous. And proudly so.

Notes

1. If one leaves aside, they add, “all questions of the amount of research actually done, and the extent to which American universities facilitate and reward it, the *normative* climate in the United States, as reflected in academics’ personal preferences, is far more favorable to teaching than most observers would have predicted” (Trow and Fulton 42-45).
2. See, e.g., Boyer, Appendix A, Tables A-23 and A-26 (reporting on the data generated by the 1989 Carnegie survey).
3. Cf. Ladd, Tables 1, 1A, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 11. Cf. the similar conclusion drawn by Bowen and Schuster (15-19).

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