

The Profession

Faculty and Community in the Liberal Arts College (With Observations on Research and Teaching)*

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Political scientists and other faculty members at liberal arts colleges belong and contribute to many communities—the civic community, the community of our schools, a variety of faith communities, and others. Two communities, however, are especially vital: the campus community and the community of our academic discipline. I am concerned that the relation between the two communities, especially at the more ambitious liberal arts colleges, is gradually—and wrongheadedly—being tilted in favor of the latter.

The *campus community* includes not just faculty, but students, administrators, staff, alumni, trustees—all who in some sense may be regarded as constituting the polity of a college. Students, typically, value the campus community enormously; indeed, the promise of such community is often what draws them to the liberal arts college in the first place. Most liberal arts faculty also value, even cherish, many aspects of the campus community, especially the opportunities for close association with undergraduate students and for friendship, conversation, and collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines.

Much of what liberal arts college faculty celebrate about the campus community distinguishes us from our colleagues in the research universities. To point up the contrast, note what some research university faculty told Burton Clark (1987, 110–13), the author of *The Academic Life*, in describing what they like about their universities: “Good graduate students are very important to me personally,” said one.

According to another, “It is a large university, and it has a lot of extremely good departments.” Here is what the research university faculty said they didn’t like about their schools: “Its immense size and the lack of ability to really get to know very many of the students”; “Each department is so strong within its discipline that it hues very closely to normal science in that discipline”; “Football! Because it’s so incredibly pervasive. You can’t get away from it.”

Compare the views of these research university faculty with what Clark heard from faculty at liberal arts colleges: “There’s a lot of emphasis on teaching and a lot of good teaching. I like that because teaching is my real vocation . . . ;” “The students are good, I have . . . a wonderful office, the campus is beautiful;” “My colleagues are fantastic.” Clark summarized the comments of these liberal arts college faculty as “a portrait painted of genuine academic community.” The political scientist in me wants to confirm this anecdotal evidence with data from broad-based surveys. That isn’t hard. For example, when asked in the 1984 Carnegie survey of faculty how they felt about their institution, 56 percent of the faculty at the top liberal arts colleges said “It is a very good place for me,” a markedly higher percentage than at the best research universities or at any other category of educational institutions (Clark 1987, 220).

In addition to the campus community, most of us think of ourselves as members of the disciplinary community, which consists (in my case) of fellow political sci-

tists around the country and, often, around the world. In contrast to the campus community, only seldom and briefly (at regional and national meetings) is the disciplinary community a community of place. More typically, it is a community of paper and of telephone cables. Seldom, too, is the disciplinary community a community of intellectual breadth and variety. Instead it is, by design, a community of shared interests.

The virtues of the disciplinary community are considerable. It enables those of us in the liberal arts colleges to continue to grow intellectually in our chosen area of interest. It provides us with a framework within which to make our own contributions to knowledge and understanding. It offers places to go for faculty who choose to—or are forced to—leave one campus community for another.

What is the relationship between the campus community and the disciplinary community in the life of the liberal arts college? In some ways, faculty find them to be mutually sustaining. The disciplinary community sustains the campus community with new findings and insights to teach to our students. The campus community returns the favor by providing us with many of the resources, tangible and intangible, that we need to grow in our disciplines.

But I would be foolish to pretend that the two communities are never in conflict. Indeed, the conflicts are present in daily, particular ways. Where does more of my time, effort, and creative energy go—to teaching or to research, to the APSA committee or to the faculty

committee, to my colleagues in other Rhodes departments or to my colleagues in political science departments elsewhere? The conflicts between the campus and the disciplinary communities also show up in more fundamental ways. How do I think of myself at the end of the day—as a political scientist or as a member of the faculty of Rhodes College?

In the liberal arts college, these tensions—to the extent that they force choices upon us—can be resolved in only one way. The campus community must be primary—that's part of what makes the liberal arts college what it is, and it is all that distinguishes an excellent liberal arts college from an excellent liberal arts division of a research university. What's more, to a great extent liberal arts faculty do resolve the tensions this way, as indicated by the results of the 1989 Carnegie survey. Asked to indicate the degree to which their college or university was important to them, 30 percent of the faculty at research universities said it was "very important," the lowest of any category of college and university faculty. In contrast, 53 percent of liberal arts college faculty said that their campus community was very important to them, the highest of any category of faculty (Boyer 1990, 120).

Unfortunately, however, the trend at ambitious liberal arts colleges in recent years has been in the opposite direction—tugging us toward the values of the disciplinary community.

To some extent, this trend—which, intentionally or not, is also a trend away from the primacy of the campus community—has been developing for reasons beyond our control. Size is one of those reasons. We in the liberal arts colleges are vastly outnumbered, which makes our distinctive mix of values hard to sustain. In the early 1960s, one faculty member in six taught at a liberal arts college; today only one in thirteen does (Oakley 1992, 98).

The culture of the graduate departments in which liberal arts college faculty originally are trained also undermines the extent to which the campus community is

valued. It does so by discounting the importance of teaching. Asked in the 1989 Carnegie survey whether they primarily value teaching or research, 33 percent of the faculty at graduate research universities said teaching—of any kind—compared with 83 percent at liberal arts colleges (Boyer 1990, 110).

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To make matters worse, the culture of graduate education encourages only one kind of research. Here's what I mean. Ernest Boyer (1990, 18–19) points out in his book *Scholarship Reconsidered* that faculty at Ph.D.-granting research universities, with their great libraries, laboratories, and hosts of graduate assistants, are uniquely situated to conduct what he calls the *scholarship of discovery*—that is, of new findings. But, Boyer argues, such is not the only scholarship of value; nor should it set the standard for faculty at other kinds of institutions. To be sure, liberal arts colleges produce their share of the scholarship of discovery. But they provide "an especially supportive climate" for what Boyer calls the *scholarship of integration*, which he defines as "serious disciplined work" that makes "connections across the disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, . . . often educating nonspecialists, too," and seeking "to interpret, draw together and bring new insight to bear on original research." One way to summarize the difference between the scholarship of discovery that is most appropriate for the research universities and the scholarship of integration that

is most appropriate for the liberal arts colleges is this: "Those engaged in discovery ask, 'What is to be known, what is to be found?' Those engaged in integration ask, 'What do the findings mean?'"

Kenneth Ruscio (1987), a political scientist at Washington and Lee, finds empirical support for Boyer's thesis that liberal arts college faculty are uniquely situated to conduct a scholarship of their own. Historically, Ruscio shows, three things have characterized research by liberal arts college faculty. First, such research has been closely tied to teaching—the standard has not been just, "What will they think of my paper at the University of Michigan?" but also, "How will this help my students to learn?" Second, Ruscio finds that research by liberal arts college faculty has been "more individualistic and less bureaucratic" than at the universities—less reliant, that is, on external financial support, massive equipment, and research staff. Third, liberal arts faculty, often perceiving their disciplines "to be preoccupied with narrow, specialized topics and marginal, incremental contributions to an arcane literature," have been more likely to adopt interdisciplinary approaches to research. The pattern has been more to reach out horizontally—to colleagues on one's campus in other subfields and disciplines—than to reach up vertically to senior members in one's area of specialization. In sum, Ruscio finds, pursuing the scholarship of integration has helped to build bridges between the campus and disciplinary communities that liberal arts college faculty are uniquely situated to build, but only by consciously rejecting much of the professional socialization they received in graduate school.

I have been describing thus far sources of the drift from the campus community to the disciplinary community, especially in the more ambitious liberal arts colleges, that lie outside our control. Other reasons for the drift, however, are very much within our control. Among these is how we in the liberal arts colleges choose to respond to the external pressures we face.

For example, if we (administrators as well as faculty) choose to reward only the research university-style scholarship of discovery, we discount what's uniquely valuable about the liberal arts-style scholarship of integration. Yet that is precisely the mistake we often make. As Ernest Boyer (1990, 55) observes, "Far too many colleges . . . are being driven not by self-defined objectives but by the external imperatives of prestige. Even institutions that primarily enroll undergraduates . . . seek to imitate ranking research universities. In the process, their mission becomes blurred, standards of research are compromised, and the quality of teaching and learning is disturbingly diminished."

Along those lines, if liberal arts colleges reward research of any kind on an almost equal basis with teaching—and substantially more than service—they will encourage the one sort of activity at the expense of the others. And what a false path to success they will have chosen. To be sure, university doctoral programs may prosper in their efforts to recruit excellent graduate students by having their faculty write for the disciplinary journals that publish the scholarship of discovery. But that's because the faculty who guide prospective graduate students in selecting a doctoral program are the very people who read those journals. In contrast, liberal arts colleges recruit excellent new students by teaching and serving their current students so well that they spread the word to their friends, younger siblings, and high school teachers.

Strongly related to these self-created obstacles to the forging of a strong campus community are the ways liberal arts colleges handle faculty tenure. Like most academics, I am a close student of tenure and a strong defender of it. But I'm also aware of some of the self-defeating messages that tenure systems inadvertently send to new, tenure-track members of the faculty:

Message No. 1: You're not really a citizen of this campus community. Don't grow too fond of the place. Don't give too much of yourself to it. Don't buy college

tee-shirts for your kids. Know that after a few years you may be banished, in a manner in which, as former Harvard University Dean Henry Rosovsky (1990, 215) has put it, the "rejection is carefully calculated, determined by close associates, and it is even public."

Message No. 2: Your lifeline is the disciplinary community. If you are cast out to look for another job, the scholarship of discovery that you have produced—the articles you have written for refereed journals—will count infinitely more than the students whose lives you have helped to transform by teaching, advising, and befriending them.

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Both of these lessons are learned at the formative stages of a faculty member's career. Thus, the awful irony is that even though tenure—once achieved—should be the greater binder of senior faculty to the campus community by assuring them that this is their home for as long as they want it to be, the two messages of the probationary period often have become ingrained. They are scar tissue that doesn't easily dissolve.

Now, as Theodore Lowi is fond of observing at a similar point in his essays and addresses, if I were writing for a European audience, I could stop right here. I have identified a host of problems and that would be enough. But I am writing

for a mostly American audience, and so I have an additional challenge: to offer some attempt at solutions.

Let me confess—I don't have ideas that will make all the rough edges smooth. But perhaps I can focus on one of the issues that I have raised, that of tenure.

I do not recommend that we abolish or in any way undermine the tenure system—far from it. The traditional case for tenure is strong. Tenure, as Rosovsky (1990, 179–80) argues, is "the principal guarantor of academic freedom, encouraging the right . . . to act upon knowledge and ideas as one perceives them without fear of retribution from anyone." Every generation of faculty in this century has experienced threats to academic freedom—some external, some internal; some political, some epistemological; some from the left, some from the right.

There is also a more modern defense. Tenure, the economic argument goes, is part of a utilitarian social contract: higher education needs talented people, and professors trade life-long security for lesser economic rewards than they could have received by pursuing other professional careers. This is an especially timely argument as we enter an era, estimated to last from 1997 to 2012 and perhaps beyond, in which the demand for good faculty will substantially exceed the supply (Oakley 1992, 101).

I would add a personal defense of tenure. My observation as a student or faculty member at several schools has convinced me that tenure has, on balance, a strong and beneficial effect on motivation and performance. The desire to teach, serve, and conduct research well springs from many sources, most of them internal. If anything, tenure helps these desires to blossom by making the tree on which they grow more secure. Thus we find that at Rhodes, for example, the average score for tenured faculty on the student course evaluation's summary question in recent years has been 4.4 of a possible 5. Is any other profession in American society serving its clients that well?

In lieu of abolition, then, what

The Profession

can liberal arts colleges do about the tenure system to reduce its corrosive effects on the campus community and to enhance its strong and positive effects? I offer three proposals.

First, the criteria for tenure should be tied more explicitly to what strengthens the campus community, namely, teaching (wisely and carefully assessed), service (especially to the campus community), and scholarship (broadly conceived)—in that order of importance, or perhaps in a variable order that properly credits the distinctive contributions of different tenure candidates.

Second, let us make the probationary period for tenure-track faculty as humane (dare I say nurturing?) as possible. All of us, by every means, should let new faculty know—in the same way that we let new students know—that we want them to make it, that we would consider their failure to earn a lasting place in our campus community to be in large measure a reflection on ourselves.

Third, if all this sounds too starry-eyed, let us recognize the competitive advantage of the liberal arts college in narrow economic terms. “The Achilles heel of the American research university,” notes Burton Clark (1987, 265), is its “inability to reward excellent undergraduate teaching. . . . Year in and year out,

major universities send away brilliant young teachers, rather than give them tenure when their scholarship does not measure up” to the narrow standards of the scholarship of discovery. It is our opportunity in the liberal arts colleges to recruit and sustain such people.

In 1991, I left a tenured position at a leading research university to accept one at a small and excellent liberal arts college. As I expected, some of my colleagues were puzzled by this decision. Surprisingly, more were wistfully envious. They, like I, originally had been drawn to the academic vocation by their desire both to teach and shape the lives of young people and to be in every sense a member of a college, not just a department, faculty. These desires can only be lived out as a member of a close-knit campus community. How foolish, then, would those of us who enjoy such community be to dilute its virtues by slavishly aping the values of the research university.

Note

*This essay was adapted from my Founders’ Convocation address at Rhodes College in September 1993. I owe much to the comments and criticisms of several Rhodes colleagues and gratefully acknowledge my debt to them: Gail Corrington-Streete (religious studies), Dan Cullen (polit-

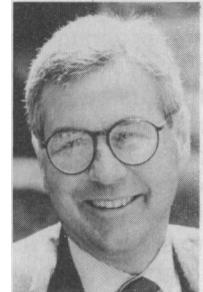
ical science), Harmon Dunathan (dean), Mehran Kamrava (international studies), Larry Lacy (philosophy), Cynthia Marshall (English), Jim Vest (French), Valarie Ziegler (religious studies), and, especially, Kenny Morrell (classics).

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About the Author

Michael Nelson, formerly of Vanderbilt University, is professor of political science at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee and the author of numerous books and articles on the presidency and presidential elections.



Introducing a Feminist Pioneer in Judicial Politics: Beverly Blair Cook

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Author’s Note: At the 1992 APSA meetings, Gayle Binion and I organized a roundtable tribute to the contributions of Beverly Blair Cook to the field of law and courts. Other participants in the session included Laurence Baum, Sue Davis, Sheldon Goldman, and Beverly Cook. I have drawn on the comments from that roundtable to provide an introduction to Cook and her accomplishments.

In “Ghosts and Giants in Judicial Politics,” Beverly Blair Cook examines the early years of the law and courts subfield and reclaims the lives and histories of its women pioneers. Cook is a pioneer herself and deserves scholarly recognition beyond the confines of the subfield.

Currently professor emeritus from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Bev Cook began her studies in political science at

Wellesley College, earning her B.A. in 1948, and attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison for her M.A. in 1949. She then taught political science at Iowa State University before temporarily “retiring” to bear four children. She returned to graduate school in 1960 and received her Ph.D. from Claremont University and Graduate School in 1962. Cook taught for four years at California State University, Fuller-