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Academic Leadership Journal

Academic Politics, Leadership, and Hospitality

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Academic

politics, we are often told, are intense because the stakes are so small. That may be true respecting many prizes — an additional file cabinet, the extra travel or software award, the preferred course, the eleven o'clock class, even the larger office with a view. Competition can be keen and strategies both imaginative and devious — though afterwards we often laugh at colleagues' foibles and escapades, and perhaps even incorporate them into institutional narratives and mythologies.

However, some stakes in

academic politics seem anything but small. Chief among them is the basic hospitality and thoughtfulness that should characterize us as members of a learned profession. How we actually behave reveals the depth of our commitment to the collective advancement of learning and knowledge and is a telling comment on the health of our profession. Our deeds reveal far more than platitudes about collegiality and the community of scholars. Here is the real test of academic leadership.

All of us need to model lives of openness to debate, interest in others' ideas, commitment to civil exchange, and reasoned assessment of positions and issues as we search for truth and consider how to extend it. In short, we should be hospitable and thoughtful.

I

Some

of our practices, though, are inhospitable and actually trammel the inquiry we celebrate. Particularly in the heat of the political moment, well-constructed arguments give way to clever but careless innuendo, modest propositions are replaced by exaggerated claims, and openness to assessing contrary positions fairly turns into suspiciousness and willingness to believe the worst. Issues of substantial budget adjustments, salary allocations, and curriculum or program development or revision can precipitate these moments. At these times we exhibit

what I call insistent individualism — insisting upon our own ways of thinking and doing and firmly resisting or even ignoring altogether others' efforts to present the merits of their positions.

When this happens, adversarial energies overcome collegial instincts. Individuals turn against colleagues, faculty against administrators, and vice versa. The quality of discourse and interchange is cheapened, interest in collaboration is diminished, and the satisfactions of working together are reduced. Individual isolation and institutional fragmentation are heightened. Some individuals become more aggressively combative than usual. Others simply withdraw, resign from committees, flee from campus, and become physically as well as psychically unavailable. At these times, our self-correcting academic mechanisms prove inadequate and the standards to which we ordinarily hold ourselves accountable are relaxed or even forgotten. Truth claims become suspect and the foundations of civil discourse and intellectual interchange are diminished and corroded.

Insistent individualism is always a danger, but these days many within academe complain that excesses have increased and that colleagues too often allow them to go unchecked — polarizing rhetoric and arrogant speeches are responded to in kind or simply ignored, lame excuses and even outright absenteeism from common responsibilities are tolerated without sufficient question or challenge, and even being forthright and candid only when personally convenient becomes the norm. Since the contemporary academy lacks effective peer challenge or rebuke, these critics allege, many academics engage in self-indulgent or abrasive behaviors they would at least camouflage in other settings.

These excesses are also noticed outside the academy, for with greater public participation in higher education comes greater awareness of its internal workings. When members of the public learn of failed civility and rationality as well as other forms of inadequate self-regulation, they come to doubt connections between knowledge and character, between being learned about the human condition and having interest in improving it. These concerns about faculty accountability are only heightened when academe allows self-promotion, self-interest and self-indulgence to go unchecked at the expense of a common good. These, then, are fundamental challenges for academic leadership. Yet, too often we are unsuccessful in addressing them.

Indeed,
a customary academic response to these concerns is to uphold the pedagogic value of individual instructor foibles and peculiarities. Professors are supposed to be different, and college experiences should include challenges to established and traditional ways of thinking. Students should be exposed to the rich variousness of the world, including unusual people and ways of thinking. Accordingly, in our boisterous moments we affirm and celebrate our idiosyncratic colleagues – occasionally even the outrageous and altogether undisciplined – although in more subdued moments we usually simply look the other way. At both times the academic disposition makes exceptions for itself, claiming exemption from the rules and expectations that govern other human enterprises.

We hear such odd things
as: 1) The academy is to examine society, not vice versa. This self-exemption is evident in the paucity of attention paid to academic ethics as opposed to the vigorous, extensive work in business, medical, journalistic, and political ethics, etc. 2) Individual professors can be intimate friends and even sexually involved with students and still be objective. Fortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests that this attitude may have peaked, but few campuses condemn it with formal statements. 3) The intellectual work of the academic mind is beyond precise measurement, and those who try disclose their inability to understand. Such arguments continue to fuel controversies about applying outcomes assessment to our own work and, thereby, becoming more accountable to the public.

Rarely do colleagues
challenge with sufficient rigor or tenacity these self-serving positions. All of us pay a significant price for this failure. That the academy examines others, rather than itself, gives rise to the arrogance with which it increasingly seems to be regarded. That faculty only fitfully acknowledge that they themselves can abuse the trust with which they have been invested by society violates the fundamental value of self-examination and exposes academe to the charge of hypocrisy. And, without careful assessment, faculty members have little or no systematic support for their claims to know what they are accomplishing in the classroom — reducing many of these claims to simple lofty pretension.

Unlike
file cabinets or eleven o'clock classes, these stakes reach deeply into fundamental matters of truth and honesty. There has to be some calculus of proportionality. Shouldn't college model integrity — accepted and acceptable ways in which truth is pursued tenaciously? Has the academy

taken excessive advantage of professorial privilege? Are the critics on track? We may laugh at the intensity with which the 'small stuff' is pursued, but it is sobering to reflect on the damage that insistent individualism and academic politics can do to larger values.

Surely this is overdrawn, some will say. Granted there are a few bad apples and, yes, they do make mischief. But most of the time the rest of us are sober and responsible, committed to open, civil, and productive work. And this is correct. Unfortunately, though, a majority of good apples may not be enough for the academy, given our traditional emphasis upon individual prerogatives even at the expense of advancing a common educational good. Perhaps the acrimony that academic politics can display is really a metaphor for our broader situation. What is a leader to do? For academic politics and insistent individualism often infect even our collective work. Departmental wars over curricula, hiring, space, budget, prestige and other resources are notorious.

Yet, it is precisely in these and similar areas that leaders must engage vigorous peer discussion and review. The emphasis we commonly place on this concept is justified only when we are prepared to make it work — when we actually engage colleagues in serious conversation about educational goals and values. In fact, I submit, it is only in the sustained practice of conversation that we really exercise our calling and justify the special privileges that society has bestowed on us as educators. It is only in the practice of being hospitable that we exemplify what education is about. It is to this vigorous, productive conversation that leaders must attend.

Academic leaders — both titled and untitled — should recognize the issues. They will also know that practicing conversation and hospitality is much easier said than done. And it is easier still to make excuses. When challenged, faculty often fall back on disciplinary expertise and boundaries. There is little sense of a general citizenship. If it is an English professor who is running amok, then his or her peers in the English department should take care of matters. They, after all are the experts. They should correct things. The problem, of course, is that those in the English department often regard as their peers English professors elsewhere, not ones down the hall. And in any case, the ones down the hall have been around for a good while, they have families to support, and there is academic freedom after all. Who is one to judge and, say, shouldn't the chair or, better yet, the academic dean, be taking take of this?

When

confronted with this picture, we know that the brief pleasures of upstaging opponents are not worth the damage created or the cold loneliness of isolation that often results. We also know that remedies are available. We do not have to tolerate insistent individualism; indeed, our academic traditions suggest we should not. The importance of displaying genuine openness to others in regular conversations is deeply rooted in our calling. More than simply a lingering piety, the practice of hospitality remains a cardinal virtue for the academy. The job of academic leadership is to remind colleagues of these things. Three common examples illustrate.

III

First,

though truth and learning may indeed be advanced through conflict, we know that consistent progress is made only through constructive conflict, not the competition of insistent individualism. As Parker Palmer (1998, p. 103) observes, “competition is a secretive, zero-sum game played by individuals for private gain; conflict is open and sometimes raucous but always communal, a public encounter in which it is possible for everyone to win by learning and growing.” Competitions marked by aggressively individualistic battles over status, territoriality, or possession are inevitably unproductive. The cost of protecting oneself over long periods of warfare with others is simply too high. Anxiety and fatigue win out.

Passivity, failure to

accept challenge to one’s position or activities, inattention to one another and disinterest in either challenging or confirming truth claims are no better than aggressive competition. Truth and learning are only advanced by mutual interest in sharing and receiving perspectives and ideas. Jointly interrogating concepts and evidence — that is, being mutually intellectually hospitable — is essential.

When we do practice

being hospitable, we acknowledge that, as part of society, academe too needs examination and critique. This is the task of academic leadership. Most of us already know this full well. It is our reluctance fully to model being hospitable, to encourage others to practice it, or to challenge the refusal of others to engage in mutual and reciprocal inquiry that is at issue. Often cast in terms of tolerance, this refusal is really a denial of hospitality. It is also a form of academic hypocrisy, as our critics point out.

A second example of

common academic inhospitality is the frequent separation established

between the personal and the professional, the self and one's work. Some educators consider this separation necessary in order to uphold intellectual objectivity. Others, though, simply seem uncomfortable in allowing these two sides of themselves to be in contact; they create separate tracks in order that work not impinge on personal values or vice versa. Examples are familiar: students of the Holocaust who show no interest or sensitivity to the capacity of humanity for evil; ecologists with personal life styles of conspicuous consumption; or, perhaps most perversely, educators who claim that consensuality of intimate relations with students does not compromise the trust involved in being an educator.

The person as a unified moral and intellectual agent is ill-treated by this separation of work and self. Our reluctance to apply our learning to ourselves makes us modern sophists, despite lofty rhetoric to the contrary. When we disconnect from our behaviors our credo that pursuit of knowledge for its own sake will liberate us, we diminish ourselves as well as our claims to be advancing the truth. The upshot is a kind of anti-intellectualism that reduces the value of learning to a matter of credentialling — an external affair rather than one with inherent significance for the questing, wondering, inner self.

I believe C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 195-196) was making the same point when he wrote that the most admirable scholarly thinkers “do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other.” Each scholar, he argued, makes “a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career; whether he knows it or not, the intellectual workman forms his own self as he works toward the perfection of his craft.” Successful academic leadership involves holding this point up for significant conversation.

A third area of common inhospitality is the squabbling between teachers and researchers that obscures common values and commitments. Teaching and research are presented as opposed, if not incompatible, pursuits. Time spent on one is deemed time unavailable for the other. Yet our traditions remind us that effective, energetic teaching requires the thoughtful, disciplined attention to inquiry and scholarship that characterizes research. And any research of value must be presented to others in understandable and provocative ways that facilitate further research and learning — elements characteristic of good teaching as well. And whether teaching or research, intellectual work is hardly beyond evaluation or measurement — though its precision depends on the logic of the work in

question.

Hospitable educators

honor these connections between teaching and research rather than defining them oppositionally. They know that the academy enjoys its many privileges on condition that it exercise exemplary, ongoing and collective self-regulation. One of higher education's chief privileges, academic freedom, rests on widespread active membership in the broader community of academic, not disciplinary, peers. It is in this broader community — not narrow, self-interested and often exclusionary disciplinary enclaves — that mutual responsibility for evaluating the appropriateness of academic behaviors and the accuracy of truth claims is rooted and engaged. Failing to attend to such academic citizenship means jeopardizing the whole enterprise. Institutions need to be more than aggregations or loose alliances among inquirers and inquiries. The latter are frequently united mainly by agreements of mutual protection — understood simply as tacit understandings to leave each other alone, as Adam Smith complained.

IV

Each

of these examples points us toward the virtue of intellectual hospitality as the cardinal virtue for the academy. It is not properly understood as being 'nice' toward each other, or even as trying to like the other. Some people are simply not very likeable. But being intellectually hospitable does mean honoring the intrinsic worth of the other — and honoring means both sharing and receiving claims to knowledge. The best way for academic leaders to practice and promote hospitality is to promote conversation.

Consider Michael

Oakeshott's (1991) metaphor of 'conversation' for the work of the academy. In the sharing and receiving of what I am calling hospitality "different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to each other" — though they can be enriched and changed. Oakeshott (1991, p. 490) suggests that genuine conversations include, but are more than, disputes and quarrels, assertions and denials. Arguments are used to clarify issues, not to vanquish opponents. The key point is respectful engagement with the other — what Oakeshott calls "acknowledgment and accommodation," not indifference or conquest. It is just such conversation that constitutes the fundamental work of the academy.

Hospitality and

conversation incorporate such familiar virtues as honesty, reliability,

and humility — virtues that we also associate with successful teaching and learning. In this larger picture, extra dollars for software programs, the eleven o'clock class, even the room with a view are pretty small stakes. Hospitality is not.

ENDNOTES/REFERENCES

1. I review some of these issues of insistent individualism in chapter three of my

Professionalism: The Academy, Individualism, and the Common Good (Phoenix, Arizona: ACE Series in Higher Education/Oryx, 1998).

2. We cannot dismiss critics of higher education as external to our campuses and only superficially informed — or internal and embittered because unsuccessful. Two of the most thoughtful, but trenchant, critics of higher education and its faculty are Rutgers philosopher Bruce Wilshire and Michigan English professor Ejner J. Jensen — both long-time, committed academics. See Wilshire,

The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). For Jensen, see his “The Bitter Groves of Academe,”

Change (January/February, 1995), 8-11. In addition, Jane Tompkins has written movingly of her criticisms of traditional higher education. See her “The Way We Live Now,”

Change (November/December, 1992), 13 -19. Her

A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned, (Addison Wesley, 1996) is an eloquent memoir and critique of her educational experiences.

3. I review some of these issues in “The Academy and Hospitality,”

Cross Currents

(Spring/Summer, 2000), 23-35. Clark Kerr notes that reports of ethical lapses in the academy have a long history, citing Adam Smith’s complaint about Oxford professors who “make a common cause to be all very indulgent to one another, and every man to consent that his neighbor may neglect his duty provided he himself is allowed to neglect his own.” Kerr himself confesses that “I once looked upon the colleges and universities as the purist ethical institutions on earth. I regret to say that I have observed what I consider to be a partial disintegration since about 1960.” “Knowledge Ethics and the New

Academic Culture,”

Change (January/February, 1994), 9,15.

4. For only one of many
internal friendly critics of the university on this point, see William
M. Sullivan,

Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America, (New York:
HarperBusiness, 1995), 171.

5. Parker J. Palmer.

The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life (San Francisco: Jossey-
Bass, 1998), 103.

6. The Sociological
Imagination, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 195-196.

7. Michael Oakeshott,
“The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” Rationalism in
Politics and Other Essays (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 490.

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