

Reviving the State of the Profession

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MLA jokes have proliferated like ethnic ones with the exception that the literature and language professors are the ones making fun of themselves. Such comical self-loathing may tell us something about why our profession is in the state it is. But first, a joke. On the streets of San Francisco outside the MLA convention, a nattily dressed English professor passes a homeless man who asks him for a handout. The professor looks the homeless man up and down and proclaims, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." Before resuming his journey he punctuates his message with "William Shakespeare." As he takes his next step, the homeless man responds, "Screw you!," followed by his own punctuated signature, "David Mamet."

I want to use this joke as a launching point to ask with whom we most identify, the pompous academic or the angry homeless man? Do we find ourselves in the position of the condescending professor, dispensing cheap and useless wisdom, or the frustrated one-upmanship of the homeless man, whose assertions at dignity produce no sustenance? When higher education allocations shrink despite economic boom, when university administrators adopt corporate and military models for governance that displace or co-opt faculty voices, when students consider their education only a largely irrelevant necessity for a decent-paying job, which they hope might be accompanied by some "lite" entertainment, when knowledge without immediate and visible public currency is considered superfluous, and when the purveyors of such knowledge are branded insulated and aberrant, then I believe we find ourselves conveniently shunted into both of these untenable slots.

The general public; many of our students, administrators, and legislators; and we ourselves lampoon us as self-absorbed and out of touch with real-world problems. In these constructions we are as lovably innocent as Mr. Chips, as foolish as a Jerry Lewis type, as hypercritical as Jean Brodie, and as drunken and philandering as a Michael Caine character. More recently, we are spoiled malcontents who preach politics and, like the robbed professors in the Marx Brothers' *Horsefeathers*, have joined in a warped chorus of "whatever it is, we're against it." Out of self-denial, self-interest, or self-loathing, we often have aided these constructions by our retreat into a sense of ivory-tower

privilege and by our eschewal of the very community we tend to invoke abstractly in academic discourse. Such a retreat is properly construed and resented as elitist.

Increasingly we also are the underpaid, the gypsy scholars, denizens of the freeways cobbling together multiple courses at multiple institutions, victims of downsizing, reallocation, shifting standards, and cost-effectiveness. Roughly two-thirds of new PhDs now fail in the year the degree is awarded to find tenure-track employment (Laurence 59, table 2). Non-tenure-track adjuncts now constitute nearly fifty percent of faculty members in four-year English departments ("Report" fig. 2, 11). Reliance on them and on cheap graduate student labor for lower-division courses indicates the denigration both of freshman and sophomore undergraduate education in most universities and of those doing it. We are the homeless, reduced to asking meekly for handouts in the form of an extra section, some shared office space in which to see our students, some remote voice in the policies that will determine our future, and some idea of when we might know whether or not our next handout might be forthcoming. What shames us most is that we must ask for these handouts from those trained as we were, whose intellectual passions and beliefs we supposedly share. We often are treated not as occupants or even visitors in their homes but rather as maintenance or service workers, uncomfortable but transient necessities. Maybe they unconsciously enact the Faulknerian pattern whereby those victimized must themselves find victims. Maybe we remind them too much of where they might be had they been born a generation later. Whether we are the entrenched academic or the tenuous one, whether we dismiss the lower-class version of ourselves or suffer the dismissal, whether we're quoting Shakespeare in aesthetic

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denial or Mamet in futile rage, both sides of this erudite doppelgänger are being screwed, and the screwing is not entirely nonconsensual.

While the cost of educating a college student grew more than sixfold over the past three decades, far outstripping the rate of inflation, funding by both state and federal governments has diminished. By 2015, a 1997 report by the Council for Aid to Education estimates, "the higher education sector will face a funding shortfall of about \$38 billion—almost a quarter of what it will need" (qtd. in Franklin 5 and in Gilbert et al. 16). As entitlement programs require a steadily accelerating proportion of federal funds and as state expenditures for prisons increase dramatically, the percentage of spending on higher education continues to decrease. Herbert Lindenberger, a former president of the MLA, cites a study from the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government to conclude that "higher education has come to serve as a 'cash cow' to finance other state needs" (3; qtd. in Gilbert et al. 17).

A pincerlike effect has been brought to bear on our profession. On one end of the squeeze are truncated legislative appropriations coupled with public resistance to higher tuition. On the other is the concatenation of growing enrollments, diminished secondary school quality and standards, increasing numbers of college students in need of remedial work, the pressure of that work falling primarily to English and language departments in the humanities, the consequent need to maintain small class sections in order to concentrate pedagogical attention effectively, and the enhanced if not complete reliance on adjunct faculty members and graduate teaching assistants to teach these lower-division classes out of economic necessity. The ideal solution, a sudden funding flow that enables the recruitment of numerous full-time, tenure-track faculty members who will teach both upper- and lower-division courses, is about as likely as OJ's confession. Even if the teaching loads of tenured and tenure-track faculty members were raised and these faculty members assumed responsibility for most composition courses, the scholarly and research mission would suffer drastically, and most of the departments now making heavy use of adjuncts and teaching assistants still could not offer all the lower-division courses needed and satisfy the demands of majors and graduate courses ("Report" 23). While we addressed the canon wars, de Man's past demons, the Gabler edition, and the Sokal hoax, the multitier job system emerged, and the strangers occupying the offices around us weren't always the graduate students we easily partitioned because of their apprenticeship status. These people also held PhDs, but we neo-Marxist cultural critics and post-colonialists too often invoked the caste system and staked our territorial claims. Status courses, travel funds, research support, new computers, decision making, and the time to address the canon wars remained reserved,

and we still had someone else to blame when the upper-division students we inherited couldn't write clearly or think critically. Unfortunately, the curtailment of faculty authority simultaneously ingrained itself in our institutional structures as a fait accompli while we retreated in elegiac lamentation.

I want to propose in general terms three interrelated actions that I think might begin to address this quandary: an enhanced public relations campaign for higher education, greater collaboration with secondary schools and community colleges, and an elevation of our self-image and healing of the internecine stresses within our departments. The thread that runs through these three items is community—our academic community, which has shifted from self-governing status to ever-tightening regulation from above and beyond, and the nonacademic community against which our campuses too often have insulated themselves, resulting in the suspicion, misconceptions, and underfunding we now suffer. Growing public distrust about higher education comes primarily from misunderstandings over the differences between the university workplace and most other workplaces. We need to do a better job of educating the public about the benefits of what we do and how we do it. And we can only do that by getting more publicly involved. Communities tend to bond most cohesively in the face of adversity, and our academic community has never before faced such adverse circumstances.

We need to become more proactive in controlling our fates instead of passively letting them be controlled. To do so, I propose that we implement the motivation behind the cultural studies approaches many of us have now adopted—to connect abstract theorizing to concrete social and historical concerns. Although this motivation has altered our research and curricular agendas, it has not sufficiently influenced our professional identities and the way we conduct our business. Insisting on the sociocultural connections in our work requires a fuller integration of our scholarly, teaching, and community missions. Such an integration, I believe, would elevate our visibility in positive ways while enhancing our contributions to social justice. Increased involvement in the community permits us a means to reshape public opinion by communicating more fully and accurately what we do and why it is important. As writers, cultural critics, narratologists, and rhetoricians, we should be using our skills more effectively to promote ourselves beyond the academy.

We need to strategize collaboratively with other national organizations related both to the discipline and to the profession generally and, through a series of planned joint meetings, analyze what threatens us and how we can adapt to survive and prosper. These efforts already have begun in various forums with the American Historical Association, American Philosophical Association, Amer-

ican Political Science Association, American Mathematical Association, American Sociological Association, National Council of Teachers of English, American Association of University Professors, National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, and Community College Humanities Association. The collaborative efforts need to be extended and intensified. I also suggest that we devote significant portions of our national conventions to addressing these issues through collective panels, massive distribution of tool kits—fact sheets, talking points, action items—and joint lobbying efforts targeted to state and federal legislatures and to corporations. We should include government, corporate, and university officials at these meetings to facilitate a mutually educational dialogue. We need to infiltrate the media and to develop commercial advertising and editorial campaigns as well as public forums in newspapers and on radio and TV that explain why what we do contributes to the country's economic, social, and cultural well-being. If the cost of such efforts means an elevation of membership dues, so be it. Our investment clearly would be designated for self-interest and potential material return.

Broadening graduate training to emphasize a pedagogical dimension would help make our graduates more marketable, but such a broadening should include a revision of our value and reward system as well as a restructuring and solidifying of our current tenuous links with the other educational levels in our immediate and broader communities. We need to stop paying lip service to our belief in the mutuality of research and teaching. To effectively integrate a pedagogical component into our graduate training, we will need to accept the study of pedagogy as a scholarly activity and reward it accordingly. The development of technologically enhanced instruction, innovative textbooks, and cross-disciplinary classrooms will have to earn scholarly merit, and we will need to bridge the prestige gap and forge seamlessness between those of us who teach writing and those of us who teach reading. Accordingly, we will have to reform tenure, promotion, and merit criteria to ensure fair and more inclusive evaluation for cutting-edge pedagogical scholarship. We also will need to integrate ethnographic studies, educational reform, and community outreach projects into our research and curricular designs. Just as we have come to understand literary theory as social criticism, we also must recognize pedagogy as knowledge production.

The elitist attitudes of the professoriat in the humanities extend to colleges of education whose programs, faculty, and students are often denigrated as intellectually bankrupt and irrelevantly bureaucratic. At many research universities, undergraduate programs in education have been shifted to the subject area to address this perception, although graduate programs in education have continued to flourish as degree mills largely to provide a *raison d'être*

and to sustain the status quo in faculty lines and budgetary allocations. My own university currently awards forty percent of its advanced degrees in education. At the same time the performance of our secondary school students has diminished relative to those of students in most industrialized countries, a genuine teacher shortage has emerged nationally, and enrollments at community colleges are accelerating rapidly. Our attention to courses in pedagogy could address these markets and broaden possibilities for the MAs and PhDs we now produce while enhancing the training and the quality of teachers throughout our educational system.

For this to happen, the condescension, threats, and turf wars between colleges of education and their sister colleges must end. Colleges of liberal arts and education especially must recognize that each has something the other needs and that collaboration will serve them both. Healthy liaisons would include coordinated curricular planning; interactions with secondary schools; and job placement, joint faculty appointments, and programs of study for undergraduate and graduate students that expand rather than circumscribe pedagogical concepts. The teacher shortage, which has reached crisis proportions in populous states like California and Texas, might be partially addressed if secondary schools could take advantage of the overproduction of PhDs in liberal arts fields. Since emergency teaching certificates that suspend normal teacher-preparation requirements are now issued in record numbers, it seems a logical next step to overhaul those requirements and permit substitution of graduate pedagogical training in the subject area. Since state funding for elementary and secondary education generally has remained status quo or has been increased while that for higher education consistently has decreased, the cost of introducing well-trained professionals into the secondary schools does not appear prohibitive. The consequences of such a plan might include improvements to the quality of education, elevated student performance indicators, and amplified cooperation between secondary and higher education in their mutual missions. Although PhDs would not be doing the university-level teaching to which they originally aspired, this alternative to the adjunct route generally would offer a similar teaching load, a higher salary, and a better chance at a permanent job.

Community colleges perhaps are more natural markets to tap for our frustrated graduates, but the lines of communication between our universities and these institutions have at best been gossamer. Increasingly, our university students take their lower-division courses at community and regional campuses. We need more outreach, more inclusion of community college faculty members at professional meetings, more dialogue about curricular planning and reform, more collaboration on scholarly projects with pedagogical implications and on external grant proposals,

more shared faculty experiences, and more concerted efforts at enlistment in our public relations campaign.

Like many who are perpetually embattled, university faculty members, especially in the liberal arts, tend to project a low self-image. We have been scapegoated as privileged and out of touch, as defilers of the intellectual purity of our charges, as people with jobs for life who only work six hours a week with summers off, and as threats to the continued viability of mainstream America. In reality, we furnish the skills in communications and comparative and critical thinking necessary for a successfully competitive corporate America. We excite and groom the imagination necessary for invention and production. We identify and explain the narrative tropes shared by a world united through the telecommunications revolution. Furthermore, our critiques of corporate America demonstrate our cultural centrality in healthy questioning and shifting frontiers; in intellectual attempts at inclusion, diversity, and connection; and in approaches that take seriously the principles of democracy.

To elevate our status with the general public requires a transformation in our own attitudes about our public function. No less than entertainers, athletes, psychotherapists, business executives, and government leaders, we help make life more meaningful and pleasurable. We deal with tough questions about values, rules, equality, poverty, death, relationships, and misunderstanding. We involve our students with these questions so that they can live their lives more fully and with greater understanding

and compassion. We equip them with their most powerful and translatable commodities—knowledge, critical thinking, and proficiency at communicating. Our scholarship, no less than that in science, engineering, and business, investigates the varied nuances of what it means to be human, our contexts for interpretation, and ways we can fathom and improve our destinies. These are essential real-world issues, and we need to voice them collectively before we no longer have a voice.

Note

I wish to express my gratitude to my colleague Amitai Aviram for his insightful and earnest comments about this topic.

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