

Chapter 63

College Faculty as Adult Learners: An Important Role in the New Age

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses an ongoing study that focuses on one particular construct—personal and professional reflection—as a means toward growth and change for faculty and the institutions in which they serve. To best set the context of why continued growth and change is critical and necessary, it is helpful to provide a concise overview of five pressures that are faced by universities and faculty, in particular, in the current contexts in which they function. The author revisits, at the end of this chapter, a disposition and enhanced capacity to be reflective, individually and collectively, to provide a heightened strength to withstand and mitigate these pressures and to envision a path through this gauntlet that ensures universities and the faculty within them a continued role in societal leadership.

INTRODUCTION

In his groundbreaking novel, *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy has his protagonist, the young boy Jude Fawley, climb a workman's ladder to the top of a barn early in the story. From the vantage point of the barn at sunset, Jude, watching the sun reflect from the windows of the cathedral at the University at Christminster, contemplates a life of scholarship, of matriculation at the university. Hardy (1970) wrote:

It is a city of light, he said to himself.... The tree of knowledge grows there, he added a few steps further on.... It is a place that teachers of men spring from and go to.... It is what you may call a castle, manned by scholarship and religion. After this figure, he was silent a long while, till he added.... It would suit me just well. (p. 19)

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Indeed, these youthful and grand conceptions of the university, its students, faculty, and ambiance frame many people's conceptions of the approximately 7,000 colleges and universities in the United States, even today. They are places with esteemed reputations for seriousness, for academic rigor, that are essentially unbounded by the laws of business; places of near-pious intellectualism and fervor. Increasingly in the United States, however, many people are coming to quite different conclusions about the role, purpose, and effect of institutions of higher education and the professors working within them are encountering criticism from a variety of constituents—media, government, tax payers, parents. American postsecondary institutions and their faculty have come under expansive misconceptions and scathing indictments in recent years (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004). Because higher education is historically central to the founding and development of this nation, and central to the continued creation and sustenance of many professional fields and academic communities on which the nation depends, a closer look at such accusations is necessary. University faculty are described beyond recognition in some circles and in ways which, were these depictions even half-truthful, should result in legal indictments, much less educational reform (Wlodarsky & Walters, 2014).

The opening to this chapter is written as a way to portray the relationship between faculty, the universities they serve and public entities that encapsulate them today. Throughout this chapter, the author will discuss an ongoing study that focuses on one particular concept, personal and professional reflection, as a means toward growth and change for faculty working within the system of higher education. To best set the context of why continued growth and change is important and needed, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of various pressures that are faced by faculty in the current contexts. These pressures include societal conceptions of university faculty, budget pressures, technology pressures, globalization and specific academy issues. The author will revisit, at the end of this chapter, a disposition and improved capacity to be reflective, individually and collectively, which will provide an enhanced strength to withstand and mitigate these and other issues, and to imagine a path that guarantees universities and the faculty within them a continued role in societal leadership and advancement.

BACKGROUND

Recently, there has been a call for greater accountability and a nationwide investment in assessing and documenting the outcomes of education (Levine, 2010). Boyer (1990) led a challenge to conventional perceptions of the work of professors with his model of scholarship, which has become ubiquitous in higher education faculty literature. His notion of the *scholarship of teaching* permeates the global community and is the framework for large-scale quality assurance programs around the world (Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2004; Strydom, Zulu, & Murray, 2004). As a result, universities have refocused their attention on the performance of university faculty, of which is the primary focus of this chapter.

A significant budgetary pressure on institutions of higher education originates from the increasingly precarious state of affairs in federal and state government budgets (Anderson & McGreal, 2012; Sack, 2005). All other things being equal, interests in competition with higher education typically dominate the budgeting process at Federal and state levels. What does this mean for faculty in terms of the financial support they need to do their job well?

“In just about every other facet of society, technology has transformed the way Americans go about their lives, yet education has been slow to embrace the transformative power of technology” (Wise & Rothman, 2010, p. 52). Still, as productivity software, social media, and innovative hardware and

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