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Faculty Development: The Personal Odyssey of a Young Faculty Member

MICHAEL ERIC SIEGEL

During the 1960's, there was a good deal of concern about college students. Brought up and socialized in a peaceful, prosperous era, showered with love and affection by their parents, and provided with the finest education and life-style that money could buy, American youth experienced a series of shocks when they confronted the unfortunate realities of their own society (prejudice, inequality, etc.), and the seemingly brutal conduct of that society toward other societies (the Vietnam War). Students responded to these shocks passionately, rejecting the values of their parents, dreaming of a more harmonious world, and challenging their educational institutions to deal more directly with social and ethical issues.

On campuses throughout the country, student protests compelled college personnel to undertake a reexamination of the educational process, its responsibilities to youth and society, and to fashion a new role for students in educational decision-making bodies. I was a college student during the 1960's and I felt excited about my generation's challenge to political, social and educational institutions.

During the 1970's there has been a great deal of concern about college faculty. Educated in a prosperous era, encouraged by an ever-expanding student universe and by society's commitment to equalize educational opportunity, bouyed by the existence of large amounts of public and private money for research and flattered by the attention given to their pronouncements by students and even the public during the 1960's, faculty were also unprepared for the veritable shocks that they experienced starting in the early 1970's.

These shocks to faculty are, by now, well-known: shrinking enrollments, greater percentages of inadequately or poorly prepared

students, salaries out-of-step with the constantly burgeoning cost-of-living, severe publication competition and loss of public confidence, to name a few.

As often happens, faculty responded to the accumulating shocks with a mood of despair, reflecting a diminished sense of mission and even of their own worth. They bemoaned the poor quality of students, rationalized their lack of publications, complained about the lag of their salaries in comparison to the salaries of other professionals and to the cost-of-living, and generally concluded that there was not much that they could do. Faculty felt victimized and powerless; despair had set in.

Colleges and their chief executive officers, aided by generous foundations and the federal government, voiced concern for the incipient demoralization of faculty and created programs to stem the tide. One dimension of the response to faculty demoralization was faculty development.

I am now a young faculty and I have already experienced the despair, but more recently the hopes of faculty throughout the nation. In fact, I have been on an odyssey and I would like to share the despair and the hopes encountered on my journey. I would like to reject the despair and stress the hope.

Strangely, perhaps, I can remember always wanting to be a teacher. I felt that the role of a teacher was primarily that of a helper—one who helps another discover the world. A teacher, I believed, had the ability to "open doors," as Eble puts it, to encourage, to help grow, to stimulate. My choice of a profession therefore, was made at a relatively young age: I wanted to become, alas, a college professor!

Entering college with a preconceived notion of a career, I concentrated on examining my professors in order to emulate their behavior and to become like them. In many cases the models worked well. Here were men and women who knew a great deal about their subjects, who mastered a particular discipline—one way of explaining humanity—and who exuded the spirit of helping others which I admired. These professors confirmed my own attitude and I failed to recognize the frailties and insecurities inherent in the profession, even among its very best.

Yet there were others who challenged my commitment to the professoriate. Here were men and women who failed miserably in

the classroom, who could not motivate students, who wore their insecurities on their sleeves, who communicated a sense of dismay about themselves and even about the world. I found myself cringing in the presence of these individuals. They had the nerve to disrupt my plan to go on to college teaching and research.

The good ones prevailed for me, since my college education took place during exciting years. And since I looked for the good in my chosen profession, I did what most of us who "join the ranks" do: I pursued a graduate education in a discipline. After a great deal of hard work I received the carrying card for the profession: the Ph.D.

It was during the last few years of my graduate education that things became truly unsettled in education. The profound societal transmutations that had unfolded during the 1960's began to take their toll. Family structures began to crumble. Young couples began having fewer babies. Enrollment projections indicated precipitous declines. Professions were suddenly glutted with Ph.D.'s. And money was scarce, as we finally confronted the consequence of having pursued, concomitantly, an expensive and elaborate "war on poverty" and an expensive and destructive war in Vietnam. All of these changes impacted universities in a negative fashion, and universities were even blamed for many of the problems. Faculty were not unscathed.

As I neared completion of my dissertation, the talk became ominous: "Are there any jobs for Ph.D.'s?" "What can you do with a degree in political science?" "If you really want to make money. . . ." "Will you get tenure at your new job?" "If you like teaching, forget the university." I had come of age.

Nonetheless, I stuck to my guns, because I still believed in myself as a helper and as a scholar. In fact, I began to submit articles for publication and to think seriously about course development.

Miraculously, an opportunity for me came along from a large midwestern university. I was accepted to participate in a post-doctoral fellowship program sponsored by the Lilly Endowment and focused on the exploration of innovative teaching methods.

And what an exciting year it was! My faith in teaching was restored. I recognized the tremendous range of possibilities that existed for a teacher in this era: PSI, audio-tutorial, "guided design," gaming and role playing, and, of course, lecturing, to name just a few. I listened carefully as the director of the post-doctoral program explained how we could create a "symphony" of learning

for the student. I eagerly designed instructional materials, sincerely anticipating how they would help students learn. I interacted with other interns who were not in my discipline and learned a great deal from them. And I thanked my stars for this experience in "faculty development," recognizing fully how limited I would have been as a professor without it.

The "real world" imploded on me again. It was time to find another job. My applications were not very successful, even with this wonderful experience. Cynicism began to creep in: maybe they were right? Maybe the only way to make it is by specializing and becoming recognized as a specialist through publication in technical journals? (I did not ever relinquish publication activities, but I tended not to publish in technical journals.)

By now the struggle was intensifying; it was the same struggle I experienced during college and once again during graduate school. Committed still to the helper-scholar ideal and totally uncertain about the future, I threw in my lot with academia.

I managed to get a one-year position teaching political science at a small liberal arts college in the Appalachian region of Virginia. There I experienced fully the helper ideal. Next I accepted yet another one year contract (which has been extended another year) with a medium-sized university in the nation's capital.

Again I was immersed in the struggle. At the university I heard a great deal of talk about low faculty salaries, about publication pressures, about the futility of teaching improvement programs, about the low quality of today's students, and about the impossibility of reconciling the liberal arts with careers. I began to wonder: are professors crazy or do they enjoy wallowing in self pity?

Luck was with me again, and I was accepted as an Assistant Director (part-time) to the Project on Faculty Development sponsored by the Association of American Colleges. The Director of the project, William Nelsen, explained when he hired me that the goal of the project was to determine what really works in faculty development. Visits would be made to twenty leading liberal arts colleges which had received grants for faculty development, and extensive interviews would be conducted with administrators, faculty and, in some cases, students.[1]

[1] A more detailed analysis of our study was reported in the Fall, 1979 issue of the Association of American College's *Forum for Liberal Education,* and two books are in press.

What we found in the study was that professors are neither crazy nor overly self-deprecating. They are, in many respects, frightened and on the run. The demoralization that began to set in six or seven years ago has hypertrophied and it has the potential of festering and decaying the soul of higher education.

Generally, the sources of fear among faculty are two. One is a series of external vairables—unfortunate, discouraging, but highly uncontrollable, especially by faculty. These include the demographic and economic realities of our time.

The second source of fear, however, can be confronted and overcome. It is the fear of failure which troubles all professionals but which frequently obsesses faculty. The problem is that we have lived with such a narrow definition of success—the sought after researcher who consults with governments and hobnobs with elites—that we unwittingly consign a large proportion of faculty to the category of failure. We spend hours expatiating about the importance of individual differences among students, and yet try to force faculty into a single mold, as if they had no individual differences. We pontificate to our classes about the importance of toleration, but fail to practice that virtue ourselves.

I think faculty development can help overcome the second fear and the general demoralization, though it is certainly not a panacea. Having visited several colleges with vibrant faculty development programs, I believe that even during this pessimistic era in higher education, most faculty respond positively and enthusiastically to opportunities to grow.

The key, perhaps, is to provide faculty with multiple avenues to success. Some will choose to travel the well-paved research and publication road. Others will walk in groups and create exciting interdisciplinary courses. Still others will explore the paths not yet travelled, and try to design new learning systems or modules. All have a significant contribution to make.

Our visits to twenty colleges have demonstrated an enormous array of exciting projects in faculty development. We have learned about the design of interdisciplinary courses, the fashioning of new core courses, the exploration of entirely new areas of inquiry by faculty members, the writing of "growth plans" by junior and senior faculty, the travel and research activities of faculty, and the coming together of faculty simply to get acquainted with colleagues or to share research and teaching ideas.

We are certain that the impact of these activities on the colleges has been quite substantial, and in some cases enormous. We sense that many of the colleges would be different places, less exciting and stimulating, without their faculty development programs.

Many of the faculty we interviewed expressed hope, although some continue to enunciate despair. We spoke with faculty who were very much alive, stimulating, excited about their work, and anxious to share their enthusiasm with colleagues. Several faculty expressed feelings of revitalization, confidence, and renewed commitment to helping others as teachers and to improving themselves as scholars. Instead of settling for despair, these faculty seek to breathe new life into the academy and to pass it on, renewed and revivified, to the next generation of professors.

Work still needs to be done, for we also encountered the old despair, even on campuses where faculty development was generally well-accepted. Spoken in different accents and couched in slightly different terms, the words of despair are still uttered by faculty.

For what it's worth, my odyssey ends on a hopeful note. I have renewed my commitment to the helper-scholar ideal that I made at a young age. The idea has power: it has weathered many storms.