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So Much Depends Upon a Red Chili Pepper

A Faculty Perspective on the Bringing Theory to Practice Project

FEATURED TOPIC

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STOPPING BY THE CAMPUS CAFETERIA to buy coffee and a doughnut one late afternoon, I bumped into an untenured colleague from another department doing the same thing. After joking a bit (in some predictably gendered ways) about just how many baked goods were required to get through a semester of teaching, she added a quip about the impact of stress-related eating on her chili pepper ratings.

Chili pepper ratings? I nervously professed my ignorance. She then patiently explained that the popular RateMyProfessor.com Web site allows students to rate faculty members not only according to standards of “clarity,” “helpfulness,” and something called “easiness,” but also in terms of “hotness,” denoted with a cheerful cartoon of a red chili pepper. Choking on my (second) doughnut, I sputtered something about how irrelevant such Web rankings were to collegial opinion.

She corrected me. Many of her students reported checking the online evaluations before selecting courses, and those predeterminations affected not only enrollment numbers in her classes but also eventual student satisfaction. If personnel committees take student feedback seriously in deciding individual review and promotion cases (as we like to believe happens at our small teaching college), then the absurd little chili peppers actually might influence her long-term professional prospects—including her case for tenure. More immediately, she noted, the specter of the chili pepper alone shaped her judgment about whether to split that second doughnut with me.

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My engagement with the Bringing Theory to Practice project did not grow out of that unsettling exchange in the cafeteria. Nonetheless, the conversation continues to shape my sense of the urgency and import of this innovative effort. My prior training in the history of science led me to reflect on my junior colleague’s self-disciplining response to the lurking threat of Internet rankings, and to appreciate anew how particular social and material circumstances act to condition our possibilities for knowledge. Understanding the relationship between the production and transmission of knowledge and broader social conditions, the Bringing Theory to Practice project strives to direct that connection in particular ways during this crucial moment of transformation.

Transformation in higher education

Of course, America’s colleges and universities have always been products of larger cultural and economic movements. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act and the advent of large philanthropic giving radically altered the shape and scope of American higher education. As funding expanded, the organization of knowledge also changed: an array of new disciplines and electives replaced strict adherence to classical and religious curricula. Small ecclesiastical seminaries gave way to larger public land-grant colleges and private research universities, and the day-to-day practice of academic life shifted accordingly. Increasingly, the laboratory, gymnasium, and seminar room replaced the chapel as centers of campus activity.

If the late nineteenth century marked the first great transformation in the conditions of American higher education, all signs indicate



that we are now in the midst of another, equally profound shift. Campus operation costs continue to rise even as taxpayer support for higher education dwindles. As a result, both private and public institutions grow newly reliant on industrial funding, from commercial research contracts with patent and licensing protections to joint marketing ventures. The four-year college degree is now rare, as more and more students enroll part-time or halt their studies midway through due to work, illness, or dependent care. And, as in the nineteenth century, the locations and habits of intellectual activity also are shifting with the times.

Millions of students now pursue their courses online, logging on to institutions from Harvard Law School to Disney World's "College of Knowledge." Tethered by networks of satellites and underground cables, academic life now takes place not only in seminar rooms and faculty offices, but also at airports and beaches, field sites and private homes. Today's increasingly wired students communicate with one another about the relative expertise, efficacy, and "hotness" of their faculty on pickaprof.com, whototake.net, grademyprofessor.com, and the more decorously titled myprofessorsucks.com. Meanwhile, the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education seeks to bring unprecedented levels of governmental monitoring and surveillance to the business of higher education, through recommendations of novel standardized tests and other kinds of educational quality control.

Much ink has already been spilled trying to assess these and other recent changes. Some commentators stress the benefits of the last few decades of transformation, including the expansion of access to higher education; the creation of new fields of inquiry such as urban studies, environmental studies, and ethnic studies; and the growing influence of women students on college campuses. Other commentators, focusing on unsettling trends in grade inflation, corporate sponsorship, and the construction of on-campus malls, detect the demise of intellectual rigor and academic freedom, and perhaps the end of the "campus" itself. In publications such as *The University in Ruins* or

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Excellence without a Soul, critics decry the ways in which global economic competitiveness forces the marketization of even those things once thought to be of incalculable forms of value.

The existence of these competing concerns is by now well known. Nor by this point will it come as any surprise to suggest that students

on American campuses appear to embody the tumult of their age: radically increased rates of depression, substance abuse, and self-injury point to evidence of disengagement and alienation not only from the ideals of scholasticism but from the joy of life more generally.

Less frequently considered, however, are the ways in which recent transformations in higher education also affect the lives of individual faculty members and the character of the professoriate as a whole. Are today's faculty—increasingly temporary, part-time, and economically vulnerable—any less heavily medicated, subject to severe depression and self-injury, or disengaged from a sense of civic responsibility or larger communal purpose than today's students are? Are they any less beholden to commitments outside the reach of conventional academic curricula: care for dependent family members, service to political and religious communities, part-time paid work? Recent faculty surveys conducted by the respected Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California—Los Angeles ask professors to assess the extent to which we "engage in regular exercise," "eat a well-balanced diet," or "experience joy" in our work. Twenty-first century professors, like our students, struggle to maintain what these surveys refer to as "a healthy balance" between "personal" and "professional" life.

Addressing the faculty side of things

The Bringing Theory to Practice project is exceptional in its recognition that the rupture between students' curricular and cocurricular lives is mirrored—if not encouraged—by the analogous ruptures experienced by today's faculty members. The project begins with the recognition that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between students and professors: the fracturing of the "whole student"

mimics the fracturing of the whole professor, and vice versa. In so doing, the project seeks to specify—rather than simply to declare—the concrete institutional and intellectual value of civic engagement, and to acknowledge that revamping educational institutions would result in some scholarly careers that look very different from existing models.

Addressing these fissures from the faculty side of things presents an enormous challenge.

To begin, there is the simple matter of faculty overwork and exhaustion—particularly on non-affluent campuses. As Linda Kerber (2005, B6) noted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the wake of former Harvard President Larry Summers’s infamous remarks about women in the sciences, the resulting onslaught of media coverage concentrated on the matter of “innate sex differences,” largely ignoring the more “primary assumption that



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the 80-hour workweek is a nonnegotiable requirement for a successful research career in the sciences (along with the implication that it does not require an 80-hour week to be successful in fields where women have made strides, like history or philosophy or English).” Added to the difficulty of keeping up with work expectations is the much-discussed (and widely lamented) fact that current structures of university hiring, review, and compensation disproportionately reward research productivity (defined almost exclusively in terms of peer-reviewed publication) over any other form of contribution or effort.

But matters of institutional review are merely the tip of the iceberg. Pressures to accommodate the odd demands of the modern university extend far beyond conventional structures of hiring and compensation: consider my colleague amending her eating behavior in

response to an anonymous student Web site. To urge untenured and temporary faculty merely to disregard or ignore such pressures denies the existence of powerful and unequal social relations. Faculty who by birth or choice do not fit dominant social norms of behavior and appearance will always be more adversely affected by such individualist and individualizing approaches.

In the context of increasing pressure to publish in highly competitive publishing environments and intensely cutthroat academic job markets, against a backdrop of enhanced surveillance and monitoring by students and state and federal governments, one can hardly fault individual faculty members for disconnecting from their larger college communities or for withdrawing from participation in campus life—to say nothing of failing to bridge that community and its larger publics.

The task, therefore, must be to join faculty members together in a common endeavor. In this sense, the Bringing Theory to Practice project's goal for "faculty development" is twofold: to begin where faculty *actually are*, to acknowledge the complex realities facing contemporary faculty with the same kind of unflinching rigor and affection with which we are trying to comprehend today's students, while creating a space for us to tackle the Big Picture—where we think liberal education is headed and why. Ultimately, real transformation would require mentoring for graduate students and postdocs that invites and encourages the integration of research, pedagogy, and civic engagement. It would require standards of hiring, collaboration, tenure, and promotion that reward deeper public engagement, without ignoring (or simply discrediting) received values of specialized, peer-reviewed research.

To these ends, we have been seeking ways to seize faculty according to their intellectual interests—that is, through the scholarly specialties in which they were trained and the research commitments in which they are now engrossed. We then strive to move with them toward a deeper and broader examination of the fundamental contract between the professoriate and the public. For instance, in June 2005, a colleague at the University of Michigan, Jonathan Metzl, and I organized a small, interdisciplinary faculty research workshop on the increasing "medicalization" of issues once thought amenable to the effects of education. This workshop, spawned by the existing research interests of colleagues, opened the door not only to scholarly publication and influence (the papers appear in a recent issue of *The Lancet*), but also to further conversation on each of our respective campuses about the shifting relationship between biomedicine, individual well-being, and practices of collective engagement.

In other settings, too, the project has been attempting to create novel spaces in which to address the inescapable and yet underappreciated mirroring between the lives of students and faculty. This process entails encouraging faculty—including tenured, untenured, and the growing legions of non-ladder-rank instructors—to rethink boundaries between teaching and learning, between conventional disciplines, between faculty and students, between faculty and student services professionals,

between the university and students' families, and between the "inside" and the "outside" of their highly heterogeneous institutions. By acknowledging the often harsh, occasionally pleasurable contradictions and tensions of professional survival in the contemporary era, the project seeks to promote a collective, ongoing conversation about the core purposes of American higher education.

The recent Association of American Colleges and Universities conference on faculty work, held in November 2006, provides a case in point. There, time and space were devoted to the exploration of some fairly fundamental questions: What, if anything, characterizes the professional identities of today's heterogeneous faculty? How have changes in their residential experiences (increased commuting times and distances, for example) affected their capacities for civic engagement? If the residential college is one of the historic advantages of the American higher education system, how might we learn whether increasing travel and commuting demands on faculty are chilling the residential climate? How might practices that link curricular with cocurricular experiences be embedded in faculty development at various levels: institutionally, disciplinarily, culturally? How might faculty be individually and collectively prepared to link these experiences—to work more effectively with student affairs officers, community members, coaches, employers, and families?

In providing and supporting spaces where such questions can be explored, the Bringing Theory to Practice project assumes that for students to flourish, faculty also must flourish. Students and faculty must join together in building institutions dedicated to an expansive vision of collective advancement. What role those cartoon chili peppers will play in that vision remains to be seen. □

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REFERENCE

- Kerber, L. 2005. We must make the academic workplace more humane and equitable. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51 (28): B6.