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ABSTRACT

Hypothetical and actual problems in the organizational, professional, collegial, and client relationships of college faculty were studied. A list of hypothetical problems was derived from a systematic literature search, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 faculty of history, biological science, political science, and business economics departments of a small, Eastern private college. Among the findings are the following: respondents recognized that within the academic profession research productivity is more highly valued than teaching excellence; historians and political scientists understood that they faced restricted career opportunities, but still displayed relatively high morale; members of all departments felt that their teaching loads made it difficult for them to keep up with their fields; many professors felt that public commitments to both high standards of scholarship and teaching excellence were sometimes contradicted by personnel actions; strained collegial relationships both within and between departments existed; and the majority of respondents were displeased by the large number of poorly prepared and motivated students. None of the following hypothetical organizational problems were widely recognized at the college: professional isolation, excessive professional demands, large classes, pressure to relax standards, inadequate pay, loose-coupling, threats to academic freedom, and limited opportunities for tenure. It is suggested that virtually all of the serious problems are related to the dilemma of attracting students while maintaining high academic standards. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

The Troubles with Teaching Undergraduates: Problems Arising from Organizational, Professional, Collegial and Client Relationships

by

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ABSTRACT

Hypothetical and actual problems in the organizational, professional, collegial and client relationships of college professors are explicated. A list of hypothetical problems was derived from a systematic literature search. Semi-structured interviews with 32 of the 36 members of the History, biological science, political science and business economics departments of a small private college revealed that many potential problems were either nonexistant, resolved or shrugged off. However, declining enrollments threaten the integrity of the liberal arts departments. In one way or another virtually all of the serious problems are related to the dilemma of attracting students while maintaining high academic standards. Further research directed toward identification of the social structural circumstances under which departments experiencing declining demand are able to withstand pressures to relax standards is suggested.

THE TROUBLES WITH TEACHING UNDERGRADUATES

The sociological literature on higher education focuses on graduate training and research, not undergraduate teaching; on prestigious, research-oriented universities, not undistinguished teaching colleges; on formal organization, not informal relationships; on student cultures, not faculty cultures and on those forces which create and maintain the autonomy and isolation of professors rather than those which draw faculty members together. This paper describes the first steps in a larger project designed to help redress these imbalances.

Our immediate objective is to identify the essential problems posed by the diverse social contexts within which undergraduate teaching takes place. The ultimate objective is to elucidate the nature, dynamics and consequences of faculty cultures. By faculty cultures we refer to the work-related perceptions, norms and values which are shared by part or all of the teachers or professors, within an educational institution. Faculty cultures are essentially cultural guidelines for instructional practice which are developed and/or maintained by informal collegial groups. In academia as in industrial (Barnard 1938; Roethlisberger and Dickson 1947; Gouldner 1954), military (Page 1946-47; Shils and Janowitz 1948; Stouffer 1949; Little 1964; Moskos 1970), and other professional settings (Blau 1957; Becker, Geer and Hughes 1968; Baldridge 1971; Freidson 1975; Parelius 1980), the work group defines means of coping with recurrent problems which are socially acceptable to its members. This informal group may also provide social support and consensual validation for individual and collective deviance from official regulations (March and Simon 1958; Blau and Scott 1962; Becker 1964; Perrow 1972; Galbraith 1973). It is important to understand work problems because they so often stimulate occupational culture-building.

Research Procedures

A comprehensive search of the sociological literature regarding the problems of academic work was conducted. It was supplemented by a computer search of ERIC (1966-79), Sociological Abstracts (1963-79) and Psychological Abstracts (1967-79) data files for materials relating to faculty cultures. On the basis of these literature searches a list of 30 potential or hypothetical problems was constructed which served as the basis for the interview phase of the research.

The interviews were conducted at a small, private college (hereafter referred to as Suburban College) located on the fringe of the Boston-Washington megalopolis. Attempts were made to gather questionnaire and interview data from all the full-time members of the History (11), Political Science (7), Biological Science (7) and Business Economics (7) departments. In the end all except two biologists and two economists cooperated, a response rate of 88 percent. Background information was collected in a questionnaire distributed in advance of the interview. The interview itself dealt with potential problems in undergraduate teaching and both individual and collective responses to those problems. These semi-structured interviews varied from 1-2.5 hours in length with the mean being approximately 1.5 hours. The professors clearly enjoyed discussing their work problems with an empathetic outsider. With only one or two exceptions they appeared to be both candid and thorough in their responses.

The Problems in Teaching Undergraduates

College professors who teach undergraduates consider themselves to be professionals--highly trained and committed experts who deserve respect, autonomy and financial security. But the social contexts within which they work may make it difficult for them to achieve the rewards they feel are due to them. There are potential problems which derive from limitations inherent in professional training and associations, organizational characteristics of the colleges which employ them,

collegial relationships and student relationships. In the pages below we will describe what the literature says about these problems as well as insights generated by our interviews.

Professional Problems

Hypothetical Professional Problems

Perhaps the most basic professional problem is that college professors are not trained to be undergraduate teachers (Newman 1971; Hartnett and Katz 1977). In fact critics of existing graduate programs feel that such programs promote a trained incapacity to teach undergraduates effectively (Katz and Hartnett 1976). The faculty within Ph.D. programs tend to celebrate research and extension of the frontiers of knowledge. In order to maximize their potential research productivity, graduate students are encouraged to concentrate their work within narrow areas of specialization. Prospective professors are expected to master the theory and research in their disciplines and to develop the skills and commitments necessary for advancement of those disciplines. They are not expected to take teaching methods courses to prepare for their future roles as undergraduate teachers. Indeed, the conventional wisdom among academicians is that the pedagogical knowledge base is extremely weak. Educational theory and research, though voluminous, is generally denigrated and thought to be useless in guiding professional practice (Lortie 1975; Dressel 1976: 353-356). So it is that preparation for teaching is neglected and undervalued in the professional socialization of college professors.

A closely related set of problems stems from the fact that undergraduate teaching has relatively low prestige within the academic professions (Jencks and Riesman 1968; Newman 1971; Ben-David 1972; Cole and Cole 1973; Light 1974; Cottle 1977: 151). Compared to research and publication, teaching can be characterized as a "semi-professional" activity because (1) educational theory, research and technology are uncertain, (2) graduate preparation for teaching is minimal or nonexistent, and

(3) instructional practices are essentially private and sheltered from collegial scrutiny and criticism (Lortie 1966; Jencks and Riesman 1968; Shils 1972; Dreeben 1973). Professional recognition is much more likely to be given to those who contribute to the discipline through research and publication than to those who are the most effective teachers.

A third set of professional problems stems from the fact that although career aspirations are often high, career opportunities are severely limited. The combined effects of oversupply of academic personnel, stable or declining enrollments, tenuring-in, extension of the mandatory retirement age and inflation have brought a depression to the academic marketplace (Parelius and Parelius 1978: 209-13; Licklider, 1979). With the advent of retrenchment, the prospects of a new Ph.D. holder for a career within any given college or university have diminished and opportunities for vertical or even horizontal mobility by moving from one institution to another are rapidly disappearing. The limited resources of professional organizations (AAUF, AFT and NEA) are strained by the effort to maintain present wages and working conditions. In fact, the economic position of the American professoriate is eroding. Especially among young, untenured professors, limited career prospects are likely to have a devastating impact upon morale.

Actual Professional Problems

Table 1 shows the percentage of professors within each department who agreed that the statements given were true. Most Suburban College professors recognized that within the academic profession research productivity is more highly valued than teaching excellence (see items 1, 2, 3 and 5). However, the figures do not show a fact revealed in the course of the interviews--namely that almost half of those who agreed that this value preference existed were not at all disturbed by it. Some of those unperturbed professors were active publishers who conformed to the dominant norm. Others were professionally inactive but felt that, contrary to the nationwide

pattern, excellent teaching was valued at Suburban College. In support of their contention they referred to administrative pronouncements and to awards which are given to outstanding teachers each year.

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Insert Table 1 here

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The majority of Suburban College professors agreed that they had been trained to do research rather than teach undergraduates (item 5). But, unlike research-oriented university professors, they generally refused to denigrate educational theory and research (item 7). Although virtually all had muddled through and ultimately found a comfortable and apparently effective teaching style, many regretted not having had formal training in teaching methods.

Historians and political scientists understood that they faced restricted career opportunities (item 4), but still displayed relatively high morale (item 6). On the other hand the biologists and business economists felt career opportunities were relatively good, yet departmental morale was reported to be low. Probing during the interviews made it clear that the historians and political scientists felt advantaged relative to members of their cohort who were either unemployed or seriously underemployed. On the other hand the biologists and economists were more likely to use the faculties of research universities or individuals working in industry as reference groups and felt relatively deprived (Merton 1957: 227-36).

Organizational Problems

Hypothetical Organizational Problems

College professors are not free professionals. They are employees who work within complex formal organizations. The formal organizational context of undergraduate teaching poses certain basic problems.

As compared with research-oriented multiversities most teaching-oriented colleges are small and relatively undifferentiated, bureaucratic, and environmentally vulnerable (Baldridge 1978). Each of these characteristics is likely to pose problems for some faculty members.

Small size, low levels of disciplinary differentiation, and lack of released time for research make it difficult to maintain professional associations and commitments. In many small colleges it is difficult for professors to find colleagues who share their specialized interests. Further, most of the courses which professors teach may be general or interdisciplinary courses rather than courses tied to their more specialized research interests. The high teaching loads generally found in such colleges make it difficult to keep up with new developments within disciplinary specializations (Bayer 1972: 31).

With the exception of a few elite liberal arts colleges, teaching institutions tend to have strong administrations and relatively weak faculties (Blau 1973; Baldridge 1978). Although college faculty members are increasingly turning to unions in an effort to gain bargaining power, administrative dominance is common. A pattern of "managed professionalism" prevails with faculty prerogatives being circumscribed by bureaucratic controls (Baldridge 1978: 92-93).

Undistinguished colleges are relatively vulnerable to external pressures. Publicly supported colleges are, of course, heavily dependent on politically determine state subsidies. And private institutions are heavily dependent on tuition payments. Relative to multiversities such colleges have few funding sources, limited operating budgets, and less independence from external sources (Baldridge 1978: 64). On the whole faculty qualifications (as measured by percentages with Ph.D. degrees) and salaries are lower than in multiversities (Trow 1975). Economic hard times are more acutely felt in marginal teaching institutions than in multiversities. In fact some such colleges have been forced to close, but no major universities have suffered the same fate.

Problematic goals may also pose problems for professionally committed faculty who teach undergraduates. The goals of colleges are typically multiple, ambiguous, conflicting and/or contested (Kerr 1963; Baldridge 1971; Cohen and March 1974; Baldridge 1978). A central area of contention within many colleges is the question of the relative importance of research, teaching and service in decision-making regarding the distribution of organizational rewards. Given the present buyer's market in the academic marketplace, it is possible for colleges to attract professionally committed young faculty from high quality graduate schools. These young professors often press for greater emphasis on research, but meet resistance from older faculty who were hired and promoted on the bases of teaching, loyalty, and service to the college. Extension of the "Publish and Flourish" (Trow and Fulton 1975: 75; Tuckman and Leahy 1975; Tuckman and Tuckman 1976; Tuckman and Hageman 1976) rule to teaching oriented colleges can be expected to produce controversy and conflict. When organizational goals are problematic it is difficult for faculty members to decide what their priorities should be. As Crecine (1974: 23) has noted, "the behavioral consequences of goal ambiguity and vagueness in educational systems is an especially important research question."

Although they are more bureaucratic than multiversities, teaching-oriented colleges are probably loosely coupled organizations (Cohen, Olsen and March 1972; Crecine 1974; Weick 1976). Their primary operating units--classes, departments, programs and divisions--are all semi-autonomous. As individuals and as members of departments and professional associations, professors resist administrative attempts at coordination and control in the name of academic freedom. Evaluation is a key element of the exercise of authority within any organization (Dornbusch and Scott 1975). But within educational institutions evaluation is extremely difficult (Astin and Lee 1967; Dornbusch 1976; Meeth 1976c; Shore 1978). Professional consensus on the attributes of excellence in teaching is lacking and professors tend to regard their classrooms

as private territories. Both collegial and student evaluations of teaching performance are resisted. Schoolteachers report that they do not know what their supervisors expect of them and that evaluations are infrequent and arbitrary. (Dornbusch 1976). It is likely that college professors feel the same way. Especially under the dismal economic circumstances which prevail on many campuses today, there may be an increasing tendency among administrators to rely on the crudest of all possible measures of teaching effectiveness--class enrollments. In any case inadequate evaluation is likely to be associated with uncertain rewards for teaching. Autonomy has its costs. Loose coupling in academic institutions is likely to foster isolation within classrooms, ignorance of important resources and policy initiatives, and competitive rather than cooperative relationships among individual faculty and among operating units.

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Insert Table 2 here

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Actual Organizational Problems

Two problems stemming from the organizational context were especially apparent at Suburban College: heavy teaching loads and maintaining enrollments. Members of all departments felt that their teaching loads made it difficult for them to keep up with their fields (item 1). And those within the three liberal arts departments faced an additional serious problem--declining enrollments--as well (item 2).

Three other potential organizational problems were acknowledged by 40 percent or more of the professors interviewed. The most widely recognized of these was goal ambiguity (item 3). Many professors were confused by the statements and actions of administrators regarding institutional priorities. Specificially, they felt that public commitments to both high standards of scholarship and teaching excellence were sometimes belied by personnel actions. Several professors had had experience on the

Appointments and Promotions Committee and reported that operative standards for achieving tenure were quite ambiguous. They felt that in some cases individuals with meagre scholarly productivity achieved tenure while in others individuals with allegedly comparable records did not. The mixed signals sent as a result of allegedly arbitrary and capricious personnel decisions confused the faculty about institutional commitment to teaching and scholarship. The fact that approximately 60 percent of the historians and economists felt that grant getting is not especially valued (item 5) may be taken as further evidence of ambiguous priorities. The necessity of having to teach peripheral courses was the only other problem which was recognized by half of the professors (item 4). The problem was most acute in the History department which had made the most extensive adjustments to enrollment declines. However, it should be noted that most historians were unconcerned about this and only three considered it even a slight problem.

None of the other hypothetical organizational problems (professional isolation, excessive professional demands, large classes, pressure to relax standards, inadequate pay, loose-coupling, threats to academic freedom and limited opportunities for tenure) was widely recognized at Suburban College. Limitations of time and space prevent a full discussion of these negative findings. Suffice it to say that many potential problems had been addressed in one way or another through collective bargaining. Through that process the faculty union had been able to ameliorate, if not eliminate, many problems.

Problems in Collegial Relationships

Hypothetical Collegial Problems

Hughes has noted that virtually all workers distinguish between true colleagues and charlatans. Those who conform to the informal norms of the work group enjoy the ". . . intimacy and protection of colleaguesbip"(Hughes 1971: 420) while deviants are shunned. Professors who are especially popular and involved with undergraduates

may be rejected as rate-busters (Meeth 1976b), standard lowerers or popularizers who lack intellectual rigor.

Most of the sociological literature on higher education suggests that collegial discussion of undergraduate teaching problems is infrequent (Jencks and Riesman 1968; Mann 1968; Meeth 1976). Instructional isolation and loneliness are recurrent themes in studies of schoolteachers (Lortie 1965; Sarason 1971; Warren 1975; House and Lapan 1978: 16-19; Parelius, 1980) as well. The core values of academic freedom and individual autonomy, coupled in some instances with hyper specialization and intense competition, may limit collegial interaction, support, stimulation, constructive criticism and guidance.

Actual Collegial Problems

Our interviews confirmed the existence of strained collegial relationships both within and between departments (see Table 3 below). Not all professors admitted that these problems existed, but those who did were generally quite concerned about them. Popular charlatans (item 1) were recognized as a problem by some members of all four departments. Individuals who attracted students through showmanship and/or easy grades were resented as deviants from scholarly norms. Yet departmental colleagues appreciated the charlatan's large class enrollments. The necessity of compromising professional standards and the inability to confront deviants were primary reasons for morale problems in all departments.

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Insert Table 3 here

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It is also worth noting that the political scientists and biologists saw themselves as guardians of high standards and were dismayed by unfair competition from other departments which gave easy grades (item 3). The historians, some of whom admitted being guilty of inflating grades, and the economists, who, along with the members of

other departments within the Business School, had no problem getting students despite rigorous standards, were less likely to admit that such unfair competition existed.

It was somewhat surprising to learn that Suburban College professors often discussed undergraduate teaching issues among themselves (item 4). Only the biologists, the most research oriented departmental group, were likely to teach in isolation. Perhaps this is another indication that research and teaching goals are contradictory.

Problems with Clients

Hypothetical Client Problems

In most, if not all, colleges there is likely to be a large gap between the professors' ideal client and the kind of student recruited (Becker 1952). Professors generally prefer students who are bright, interested and intellectual (Davis 1965; Platt, Parsons and Kirshstein 1978), but they often teach students who are inadequately prepared, bored and primarily concerned with getting a job. And yet, as Hughes has noted, students are "influential amateurs."

> It is characteristic of many occupations that the people in them, although convinced that they themselves are the best judges, not merely of their own competence but also of what is best for the people for whom they perform services, are required in some measures to yield judgment of what is wanted to these amateurs who receive the services. This is a problem not only among musicians, but in teaching, medicine, dentistry, the arts and many other fields. It is a chronic source of ego-wound and possible antagonism (Hughes 1971: 346).

Although there is extensive variation among institutions in terms of student power and influence, it exists to some extent in all colleges and universities. Although students may not occupy formal positions of authority, as consumers who are relatively free to choose among courses, they do have an impact (Clark 1956).

Another set of problems stems from the fact that professors must teach students

in relatively large and heterogeneous batches rather than as individuals in the way that doctors and lawyers deal with their clients (Wheeler 1966). Batch-processing of clients is efficient and economical but from the faculty point of view it clearly has serious costs. A wide range of students is likely to be enrolled in any given class, including some who are bright and motivated, some who are dull and uninterested, and many who fall in between these extremes. Professors are not trained to deal with this diversity. And organizational rewards for the effort involved in trying to individualize assignments are uncertain at best. Batch processing also limits the possibility of professors enjoying the important psychic rewards which come from the knowledge that teaching efforts have a clear and strong impact on at least some students (Lortie 1975: 134-161).

Actual Client Problems

The first question in our interview was an open-ended one, "What are the most serious problems that you face as an undergraduate instructor in this department?" The overwhelming majority of professors referred to the large number of poorly prepared and motivated students. They complained that admissions officers were "scraping the bottom of the barrel" and that as a consequence Suburban College was filled with students who simply "did not belong in college." Item 2 in Table 4 below gets at this problem. Overall 79 percent of the professors recognized the problem existed. And, as one would expect, professors in the liberal arts departments which were experiencing enrollment declines felt this most keenly.

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Insert Table 4 here

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Only two other problems were widely acknowledged. Although 82 percent of the faculty members agreed that the psychic rewards of undergraduate teaching are

sporadic at best (item 1), probing revealed that few were deeply troubled by the fact. Most simply assumed that their efforts had some, albeit immeasurable, impact. Virtually all professors expressed a general distaste for introductory survey courses (item 3). However, the historians, political scientists and biologists all reported that declining enrollments had transformed many upper-division courses into small seminars, almost tutorials, which were quite satisfying to teach.

The "influential amateurs" problem (items 4 and 5) turned out to be quite complex. On the one hand the required, official student evaluations were universally considered to be meaningless rituals which were unimportant in tenure and promotions decisions. The union had successfully bargained for extensive safeguards in the use of those evaluations. On the other hand students did vote with their feet in the course selection process. Within the liberal arts division enrollments had dropped shortly while they had risen sharply in the business division. Liberal arts faculty were obliged to revise curricula, participate in both internal and external student recruitment activities, and, in some cases, to water down courses, spoon-feed students and inflate grades. To further complicate the issue, the great majority of professors accepted the idea that students were intelligent consumers who generally made sound judgments in course selection and evaluation. Nevertheless they were deeply concerned about the "charlatans" within their midst and the negative impact that their teaching had on student development and expectations.

Conclusions and Implications

Our results underscore the inadequacies of the existing literature. Many hypothetical problems have either been resolved or shrugged off by Suburban College professors. Because professors at so-called "leading" elite institutions have had little contact with their colleagues in undistinguished teaching colleges it is

easy to understand why they sometimes assume that all academics share their values and problems. Our interviews make it clear that value-sharing is incomplete and that problems vary.

One problem which professors in selective universities do not face is that of declining enrollments. The impact of enrollment economies is dramatically apparent at Suburban College. Most of the troublesome professional, organizational, collegial and client-related problems faced by Suburban College professors are related in one way or another to the dilemma of attracting students while maintaining high intellectual standards.

Although one must be extremely cautious about generalizing from a study of four departments within a single college, our results indicate the importance of further research directed toward identifying the social structural circumstances under which departments experiencing declining demand are able to withstand pressures to relax standards. Such research would contribute both to sociology as a discipline and to administrative practice.

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