A Community-Oriented Model of Academic Professionalism

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Abstract

The prevailing model of academic professionalism inhibits faculty members' engagement in their communities and restrains discovery of new knowledge. An alternative community-oriented model is proposed. Reflective practice, epistemological inclusiveness, and redesigned incentives structures are needed to encourage the alternate model.

Professors are professionals. They subscribe to a prevailing model of academic professionalism (e.g., Schein 1973; Glazer 1974). That model reflects the professorate's desires to advance knowledge, as well as their aspirations for status and monetary rewards. Unfortunately, the prevailing model encourages professors to neglect the communities in which they live. The epistemological assumptions of the prevailing model discourage professors from engaging with communities in the conduct of research. This inhibits the discovery of new knowledge. The prevailing model's pedagogical assumptions discourage professors from utilizing the resources of communities in students' education, which inhibits the conveyance of knowledge to future generations. It is necessary, therefore, to consider a different model of academic professionalism, one that emerges from, and harnesses the benefits of, a concept called "community."

A community is a framework of social contexts that convey a sense of identity to group members. "A group is a community to the extent that it encompasses a broad range of activities and interests, and to the extent that participation implicates whole persons rather than segmental interests or activities (Selznick 1992)" People need a sense of community. They need social ties, especially those that help to provide a sense of identity, meaning, moral authority, and purpose. Academicians are no exception.

Communities exist within and beyond the boundaries of universities. A university itself is a community when it provides its faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends with identity and valued social interaction. Faculty members are socialized into various disciplinary communities. Many see themselves as members of a scientific community. Others see themselves as members of communities of classicists, musicians, sculptors, philosophers, physicians, accountants, and so on. Occasionally faculty members think of themselves as members of a broader academic community. Universities (the non-virtual variety) exist in a physical space, so spatially defined communities surround them. Cosmopolitans on campuses see universities as participants in national or global communities.

Communities sometimes go awry; they can be oppressive. When that happens, academicians are obliged to critique and criticize such actions. Communities are also valuable repositories of information, some of which can be used to better the quality of life. It is appropriate, therefore, that scholars should study the interrelationships between universities and their many communities.

The Prevailing Positivist Model of Academic Professionalism

Considering the importance of universities to communities, and vice versa, it is unfortunate that a model of professionalism prevails within academia that hinders the acquisition of knowledge from communities, as well as its application to them. Rooted in positivism, the prevailing model of academic professionalism is unrealistically individualistic. It is based upon a mistaken understanding of inquiry that presents scientific discovery as if it were an exercise in cold logic, absent any social dimension. Positivist research often neglects the broader contexts within which the discovery and application of knowledge can occur. The prevailing model rewards research far more than good teaching or service. It also encourages specialization to the detriment of multidisciplinary "sensemaking" (see Pfeffer 1993).

The prevailing model has obviously encouraged much discovery of new knowledge, but it also inhibits knowledge acquisition in two ways. First, by neglecting the "communities of practice" that exist within and among campuses, the prevailing model leads to a failure to appreciate and mobilize the innovative potential of the social processes that underlie much discovery of new knowledge. Second, the prevailing model causes many academicians to fail to acknowledge and tap the wisdom that exists in people who do not share their professional credentials. These people often live in the nearby communities that house universities. Distancing universities from the communities within which they reside, the prevailing model inhibits the conveyance of knowledge from and to those communities.

An alternative model of academic professionalism is needed. It should foster awareness of the social dynamics relevant to the academic profession—those within academia and those that exist beyond campuses. The alternative model should enhance creative processes on campuses. It should also open university research to the wisdom that resides in persons beyond campuses. The alternative model should improve teaching by better linking students to the resources and wisdom of various communities. Finally, the model should enhance the ability of universities to communicate knowledge to their communities. Such a model, a model of community-oriented academic professionalism, is outlined below.

Characteristics of Professions

Professions, as we know them today, emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century. To serve the information needs of industrialized society, reformers pressed for legal recognition and protection for professions. Autonomy and deference were sought to empower professionals to apply knowledge in society's best interest. The deference and legal protections were also in the economic self interest of the professionals (Larsen 1977).

There is little agreement as to whether some occupations are professions or not. Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics which typify professions (Schein 1973; Greenwood 1957).

1. Certification as a professional is preceded by a long period of formal training in a systematic field of knowledge, not merely in complex skills. Possession of this knowledge allows members to claim authority over its application.

2. Professions have distinct cultures. They are communities that are important sources of identity for their members. Behavioral standards and expectations are operationalized through informal group norms as well as through formal statements of ethics and practices that can be enforced both formally and informally.

3. Professions espouse a commitment of service to society. In return, professions seek deference from society in the creation and application of their specialized knowledge.

4. Professions seek a "monopoly of judgment" in their field while upholding the autonomy of individual practitioners to design treatments for clients or to frame and conduct research. The exercise of individual members' discretion is subject to peer review. Review of professionals' performance by nonmembers is typically resisted.

The knowledge base of most professions is derived from research conducted by academicians. Practitioners, however, frequently encounter difficulties in applying that knowledge to specific situations. Within professions, a tension often exists between researchers, engaged mostly in theory building, and practitioners who seek to understand and cope with specific complex situations. In some professions academics create separate conferences where research papers will be more *scientific*.

Practicing professionals have been a major factor in the growing criticism of positivist-based inquiry. Practitioners need methods to gather information, and to make sense of it, in actual situations, not in contrived laboratory settings. Information gathered in the

field, from site-specific situations, sometimes challenges existing theory. Consequently, many academicians have concluded that positivist inquiry is too limited and argue that post-positivist methods are needed.

"Professionalism" in Academia

The earliest professions—law, medicine, and the clergy—based their claims to legitimacy and authority upon university-based knowledge. Although the specific knowledge base of each academic discipline differs, professors have long claimed that an encompassing "academic profession" exists. Faculty members undergo extensive training and testing. Their performance is subject to peer review. Standards and sanctions enforce basic norms, especially those related to the integrity of research. Arguments were made that academicians' discoveries were of unique importance to society. In return, deference—especially in matters of curriculum, tenure, and academic freedom—was extended to members of the academic profession (Bledstein 1976).

To be fully respected by peers on campuses, it became necessary for every discipline to claim a coherent body of theory. This presented no problem to the natural sciences (once the restrictions of religion were discarded). But it was problematic for other disciplines. A faculty of English, for example, could not just create new literature. It had to develop theories to critique and explain the literature of the past. The campus reputations of multidisciplinary fields of study, those that draw upon the theories of other disciplines, often suffered as a result of their lack of a "coherent" body of theory that was unique to their particular field of study.

In 1915, for example, Abraham Flexner, a leader in professional education, told social workers that they could not claim to be a profession because they mostly engaged in mobilizing and coordinating other professions such as medicine and law. He warned that they would not be deemed a profession if the knowledge they utilized was distilled from clients in clinical practice. Knowledge gained in this manner lacked the "theoretical coherence characteristic of a science" (Stivers 2000). Academic leaders argued that such coherence emerged through university-based research, through systematic "scientific" inquiry, rather than from clinical experience in the field (Austin 1983).

Ironically, this was a direct contradiction of the views of Jane Addams, one of the most important founders of social work. Addams believed that much vital knowledge could only be gained in the field from intimate interactions between social workers and those whom they sought to help. Although she was influential in helping the University of Chicago become a leading school in the social sciences, she feared that university-based prejudices and perspectives would lessen the ability of social workers to tap the wisdom of their "guests" (Addams' preferred term; see Stillman 1998). Modern proponents of post-positivist methodologies and perspectives would agree with her. They argue that theory is often unrealistically abstracted from reality and that adequate theory can only be built through rigorous reflections based on the richness of field observation and experience.

Academia bases its claims to professionalism upon its complex bodies of knowledge. But that knowledge is not immutable. The theories of science are challengeable. University-based research can cause the theoretical foundations of professions to be upended. Psychiatry and psychology were once based on the theories of Sigmund Freud, but many of Freud's theories did not stand up well under scrutiny. Some Freudian-based professional practice was subsequently discovered to be harmful, as in blaming the parents of autistic children for an affliction that is now thought to be genetically based. This raises *a key point in understanding professionalism in academia*. The scientific method itself can cause underlying bodies of theory, and related professional practices, to be challenged. The underlying knowledge of disciplines cannot be claimed to be immutable, and that weakens any profession's claim to deference. *What can be claimed to be immutable is the scientific method itself.* Academicians claim preeminence in the exercise of that method and that claim is fundamental to their status in society.

 Accumulated wisdom is stored in professions' "communities of practice," especially in the stories that members share with one another. Communities of practice are social frameworks within which practicing professionals interact with one another, sharing experiences and seeking advice to make sense of things. In academic communities of practice, young scholars hear how older members organized themselves and interacted in the processes of discovery. From those stories, they learn better how to organize and conduct research. Communities of practice also enhance teaching by conveying accumulated wisdom about instruction. Because communities of practice operate informally, university bureaucracies act as if they do not exist. Blind to the existence of communities of practice, most university administrators do little or nothing to help them function better.

Nurturing communities of practice, especially ones that embrace both practitioners and academics, could spur creativity and discovery. Teaching could also be improved. Unfortunately, the individualistic assumptions of the prevailing model of academic professionalism continue to cause a profound neglect of the creative potential of communities of practice. A more community-oriented model of academic professionalism is needed, one that embraces the collaborative nature of research and discovery. It would encourage new pedagogies to teach future academicians to better appreciate and manage their informal communities of practice. Also, a better appreciation and understanding of the concept of community on campus might open academicians to the wisdom that lies in communities beyond campuses. Strengthening "community" on campus might enhance the capacity and inclination of universities to link themselves to their surrounding communities.

Professions and Society are Shaped by "Professionalism" On-Campus

Professions are becoming increasingly important vehicles for the perpetuation and enforcement of important norms of behavior in our society (Benveniste 1994). Socialization into professions begins on college campuses. *Universities are the cradle of professions and the primary socializers of future professionals*. The ethos of professionalism that is learned on campuses shapes the practice of all professions beyond campuses. If professionalism as practiced on college campuses is not community-oriented, it is unlikely that the practice of professionals off campus will be community-oriented.

If the old model of academic professionalism continues to prevail, there is reason to doubt that future professionals will be attuned to their communities—to their own communities of practice or to the broader communities that professionals should study and serve. A community-oriented model is needed in academia for the sake of all professions, and of society itself. Whatever model of professionalism prevails on campuses shapes the nature of professionalism in all professions. Making any profession more community-oriented must, therefore, begin with making universities more community-oriented.

Strengthening Community-Oriented Professionalism in Academia

Many professors believe that the prevailing model of professionalism in academia is insufficient. The Association of American Universities reports that the number of university-community linkage projects has increased rapidly. The reasons for this are several. First, universities need to improve the application of their knowledge toward the betterment of communities. Second, students' education is enriched by exposure to communities. More students are being involved in experiential learning through community service projects. Finally, some academics believe that there is wisdom in off-campus communities that prevailing modes of inquiry fail to tap.

Efforts to better serve communities, or to involve students in them, engender occasional opposition on campuses (usually in the belief that community linkage diverts scarce resources from traditional functions). The greater conflicts, though, seem to emerge from fears that community-oriented modes of inquiry lack rigor. The scientific method lies at the heart of academia's perception of itself as being professional. Any challenge to the prevailing definition of the scientific method can threaten academicians' self image and status as professionals. Any lessening of scientific rigor is seen as a betrayal of professors' commitment to the pursuit of truth.

It is essential, therefore, that a community-oriented model of academic professionalism be one that encourages sound research. It should seek to tap the wisdom that exists in communities in ways that are rigorous and defensible. If universities do not give equal status to post-positivist research methodologies it is unlikely that academia will ever

become truly oriented toward communities. To secure that status, post-positivist researchers must be rigorous and dedicated to the advancement of theory.

Community-oriented research often emerges from reflective practice (Schön 1983). It begins when practitioners perceive a gap between their assessments of situations and the prescriptions of their prevailing theories. Oriented more toward sense making than theory building, reflective practice is ignored or discredited in many university circles. Reflective practice should, instead, become a standard complement to university-based research. Reflective practitioners can help university researchers to expose weaknesses in prevailing theory and to test new ideas in practice. Reflective practice can help to better target and focus research projects that use either positivist or post-positivist methodologies. A community-oriented model of academic professionalism, therefore, should seek to build complementarity between positivist and post-positivist research, not waste professors' time and energy in fruitless battles for ideological supremacy.

To improve linkages to communities, universities should encourage close relationships between their researchers and practicing professionals. The knowledge gained from practitioners' diagnoses and understandings of situations in communities can help to guide research. Their testing of new theory can help to validate it under field conditions. In addition, close partnerships with community professionals can give universities points of access to better direct their community services. In short, recognition of the role of reflective practice could enhance both research and service.

A community-oriented model of academic professionalism must meet several requisites. First, it must sustain academics' views of themselves as professionals. The model must affirm the essence of the scientific method—rigorous investigation, open critique, and commitment to theory building. It should have stringent peer review and high standards of acceptance for research. *Second*, it should open new doors to research that could lead to greater understanding of, and benefit to, communities. It need not reject positivist methodologies, as they are preferable for many research situations. A model of academic professionalism that embraces post-positivist methods, though, will illuminate the weaknesses of positivist methodologies on occasion (just as positivist studies can challenge findings that emerge from post-positivist inquiries). *Third*, an alternative model should facilitate a redesign of faculty evaluation and incentives systems to encourage community engagement.

Conclusion

The prevailing model of academic professionalism creates an invalid perception, a myth, that academic research is performed by isolated individuals. Research is often a very social process. We academicians should become reflective practitioners, learning introspectively from our own professional practice. Doing so will reveal that our true modes of inquiry, those which we use daily, are socially framed, not solely exercises of abstract logic. Like other professionals, academicians form communities of practice. If those function well, the result is a process of creative interplay that enhances the

performance of individual scholars. Community-oriented academicians should develop new pedagogies to teach young researchers how to facilitate and use their communities of practice.

Reflective practice is also needed among university administrators. It is they who administer the incentives structures that will ultimately determine the fate of community-oriented academic professionalism. Recognizing the existence of communities of practice is the first step toward enhancing them. Campus focus groups, and similar techniques, can inform administrators how to enhance professors' communities of practice, beginning with removing the bureaucratic obstacles that complicate their functioning. In-service training, utilizing group dynamics, might help scholars learn to become more innovative and effective. In short, reflectively led universities seem likely to be more innovative and of greater service.

Recognizing professions' communities of practice raises important questions about the limits of distance education. The prevailing model of academic professionalism assumes that professionals, on or off campuses, need only learn abstract knowledge. That type of knowledge can be conveyed electronically (though how well is still a matter of debate). Community-oriented professionalism, though, stresses that professionals must be educated to function well in social contexts. Professionals need to learn to facilitate their communities of practice, on or off-campus. Students need to be involved in informative and character building modes of community service. Can these social perspectives and skills be taught well via distance technologies? Distance education, alone, might badly neglect vital socialization for future members of professions (Brower and Klay 2000).

The alternative model must set high standards in all three areas of academia—research, teaching, and service to communities. A hallmark of university based research is its independence and its quality. Those qualities are also needed in instruction and service. One reason that professors' community service is discounted heavily by the prevailing model is that it seems soft, easier to accomplish than disciplinary research, and less subject to rigorous reviews of quality. The best way to assure that quality prevails in all three areas of academic performance is rigorous peer review of that performance. The model therefore, should provide a basis for extending peer review fully into the evaluation of both teaching and service, while sustaining it in the evaluation of research.

A community-oriented model should alter campus incentives structures, creating a better balance between research, teaching, and service. Good research remains vitally important, but the alternate model seems likely to enhance the importance of teaching and service. It heightens the importance of preparing well-educated members of society, therefore it should better illuminate the importance of good instruction. It certainly sheds new light on the importance of service to communities.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to the adoption of the alternate model is the widespread feeling, engendered by the prevailing paradigm, that too much community

involvement diverts universities from their central missions of research and instruction. This misperception can be combated by forceful argument and demonstration that becoming more community-oriented opens new doors for research. It taps neglected wisdom and provides a framework for testing theory in actual application. If professors become aware that their own research is better accomplished within well-functioning communities of practice, and that better links to their surrounding communities will yield new knowledge, then a community orientation will begin to take root. From that, greater attention to community-oriented instruction and service can emerge. In short, becoming truly community-oriented in academia is only possible through the careful nurturing of a new, comprehensive, paradigm of academic professionalism.

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