

Department of Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

Fiat Lux Seminar (IS19), Spring 2009

Homo Academicus: The university professor and its critics

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<http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/blanchette/IS19/Spring2009/syllabus.pdf>

Seminar description

It is obvious to college students that university professors teach, but what is it that *academics* do? This seminar will examine the often arcane, sometimes peculiar, institutional mechanisms that define the activities of academics, including tenure, faculty governance, peer review, scholarly communication, research funding, and doctoral training. In each case, we will provide historical context and discuss major controversies, including relevance of humanistic education to contemporary life, the academic-industrial complex, and politicization of the classroom. The seminar will provide students with a more detailed map with which to navigate their own academic experience.

Seminar policies

Grading will be solely based on attendance and participation in class discussions, based on weekly readings. More than one absence (motivated or unmotivated) will result in a “unsatisfactory” grade. In order to maintain a focus on class dynamics and group discussion, there will be no use of computers during class time.

Schedule and readings

Week 1 (April 1st): Overview

In a *research university* such as UCLA, professors are expected to perform a variety of tasks beyond those of undergraduate instruction. These tasks, generally designed with the purpose of *the advancement of knowledge*, include research, publication, conference presentations, graduate instruction and mentoring, editorial service such as peer reviewing, professional service such as peer evaluation for promotion and tenure, submission of grant proposal to funding agencies, participation in university governance, and dissemination of advanced knowledge to the wider public through teaching or participation in public debate.

This system for the production and dissemination of certified knowledge is the labor of a certain kind of ‘knowledge workers’, academics. The organization of this labor dictates the material conditions under which knowledge is produced (for example, the division of teaching duties between ‘tenure-track’ and ‘adjunct’ faculty). These material conditions vary tremendously across space and time, according to different economic, cultural, or technological pressures. In this seminar, we will be looking at the interaction between this

social system for the production of certified knowledge, and the organization of the labor forces that undergird this system.

Read:

Stanley Fish, “The Last Professor”, New York Times Blog, January 18, 2009.
<http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/the-last-professor/>

Week 2 (April 8th): Research AND teaching

It is a unique feature of research universities that they expect professors to *both* conduct research and teaching activities. The two activities seem to involve very dissimilar set of skills: communicating basic ideas to laymen, and producing esoteric knowledge for consumption by other experts. Some of the most common complaints about the research university revolve around this issue:

- excellence in research does not automatically translate into teaching skills, and PhD programs often provide little or no training in pedagogy;
- excellence in teaching is not rewarded in the same way that excellence in research is, and research stars, used by universities to bolster their reputation and attract students, often use grants to buy their way out of teaching.

These complaints have been heard ever since the late 1800s, after the German higher education model was imported by admiring American university administrators, and with it, the idea that scholarly investigation should be awarded priority over instruction.

Read:

Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education — A History 2nd ed.*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 177-189.
<http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/blanchette/IS19/Spring2009/lucas.pdf>

Office of the President, University of California, APM 210, “Review and Appraisal Committees”, *University of California Academic Personnel Manual*, (read 210-1-d)
<http://www.ucop.edu/acadadv/acadpers/apm/apm-210.pdf>

Week 3 (April 15th): No class (Jean-François at NSF review panel)

Week 4 (April 22nd): Peer review

Peer review is the fundamental and nearly universal scholarly mechanism for quality control in the production of knowledge. It consists in the evaluation of a scholarly product by competent peers of the author(s). One of the primary tension in the peer review mechanism is that the persons most competent to evaluate the quality, veracity, and originality of a scholar’s research are by definition either her competitors or her collaborators. As well, many other characteristics of the academic field induce bias in the peer-review process — f.ex., “halo” and “Matthew” effects, as described by Merton — and tend to reinforce the overall conservative force of peer-review on knowledge production.

Read:

National Science Foundation, Program Solicitation NSF 08-575, “Information and Intelligent Systems (IIS): Core Programs”, section VI: “NSF Proposal Processing and Review Procedures”

<http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2008/nsf08575/nsf08575.htm>

Marcel C. LaFollette, “Decision Making: Editors and Referees”, in *Stealing into Print — Fraud, Plagiarism, and Misconduct in Scientific Publishing*, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 138-136.

<http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/blanchette/IS19/Spring2009/lafollette.pdf>

Week 5 (April 29th): Academic labor

The defining contemporary trend in the organization of academic labor is a reduction in tenure-track faculty line, and a corresponding increase in reliance on adjunct/part-time faculty to carry on teaching duties: between 1969 and 1998, the number of full-time faculty grew by 60%, while the number of part-time faculty grew by 369%. Nationwide, traditional tenure-track faculty performs only about a third of the teaching in colleges and universities. As part-time faculty does not enjoy the incentives and freedoms in research and teaching associated with tenure, this shift has important implications on all other dimensions of the academic system.

Read:

Mark C. Taylor, “The End of the University as we know it”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/opinion/27taylor.html>

Jeffrey Selingo, “An Administrator Takes Up the Cause of Adjuncts”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 24, 2008.

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i09/09a00401.htm>

Robin Wilson, “Adjuncts Fight Back Over Academic Freedom”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 3, 2008.

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i06/06a00102.htm>

Watch:

Interview with Michelle Masse on the “feminization of the University”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXHzvWyKLO>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig18SWw-h6g>

Week 6 (May 6th): Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is one of the best known and most controversial aspects of the academic system. It is comprised of specific species of freedom of speech, i.e., freedom in research and publication, and freedom in teaching. In practice, it is accomplished through the institution of tenure. These freedoms are not absolute however, and their exercise is predicated on the observance of concomitant duties, e.g., controversial teaching material must be related to the course topic, personal opinions distinguished from professional ones, etc. There is no shortage of criticism of tenure — absolute job

security is rarely an incentive for creativity, and granting special rights to freedom of speech is tricky business. In any case, the number of tenure-track faculty positions is simply dwindling in comparison with part-time or full-time non-tenure-track faculty jobs. Thus, the case for academic freedom must be made anew, in the face of the changing conditions for the professional practice of scholarship.

Read:

American Association of University Professors, “1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, with 1970 Interpretive Comments”,
<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1940statement.htm>

Horowitz:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_Bill_of_Rights

<http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/documents/1922/sbor.html>

<http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/documents/1925/abor.html>

<http://www.uclaprofs.com/articles/dirtythirty.html>

Week 7 (May 13th): The academic-industrial complex

A defining transformation of the academic landscape in the last 25 years has been the increasingly tight relationship between academic research and industry. One model of this relationship involves university professors performing research using funds from industry — for example, running clinical trials for drug makers. Another model involves professors entering into profit-sharing agreements with universities over the commercialization of their research. These arrangements seem profitable to all parties: researchers and universities gain access to important sources of research funds, in an era of diminishing public funding for higher education; industrials find a relatively cheap outlet for outsourcing their R&D activities, and in the process, benefit from the aura of neutrality of academic research. Less clear are the implications for the University as an institution devoted to the production of impartial knowledge that benefits the whole of society.

Marcia Angell, “Drug Companies & Doctors: A Story of Corruption”, *New York Review of Books*, 56(1), January 15, 2009.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22237>

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22272>

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22363>

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22441>

Week 8 (May 20th): Governance

The daily running and long-term planning of a University requires massive amounts of decision making, from curricular decisions, to hiring, to maintenance of facilities, funding, etc, etc, etc. It has long been recognized however that education serves a public function that must be somewhat isolated from purely economic considerations. University decision making processes are thus often structured in ways that allow for sharing of power between faculty, who deal with curricular and employment issues, and university

administrators, who deal with, among other things, budgetary issues, admissions, and facilities . In the UC system, the system is referred to as “shared governance”.

Read:

John Aubrey Douglass, “Shared Governance at the University of California: an Historical Review,” UC Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education, March 1998.

<http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/docs/PP,JD.SharedGov.1.98.pdf>

Meet the UC regents:

<http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/regents/brochure.pdf>

Duties, Powers, and Privileges of the Academic Senate

<http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/regents/bylaws/so1052.html>

Week 9 (May 27th): The ivory tower and public intellectuals

The term pejorative term “ivory tower” is often used to describe the world of academia as a universe of specialists disconnected from the ordinary concerns of laymen. Not only are academics concerned with questions that seem to have very little to do with daily life, the language and intellectual tools used to discuss these questions often seem unnecessarily obscure, full of fanciful jargon. The “ivory tower” thus signals a troublesome discrepancy between the academic ideal of the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of all and the (real or perceived) insularity of academics from real-world societal concerns. What then is this thing called a “public intellectual”?

Read:

Steve Fuller, “The Public Intellectual as Agent of Justice: In Search of a Regime”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2006.

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/philosophy_and_rhetoric/v039/39.2fuller.pdf

Week 10 (June 3rd) Credentialing — the PhD

Today, entrance into the academic profession is contingent on obtaining a PhD, a lengthy program which includes several years of coursework, exams, and the writing and public defense of an original work of research, the doctoral dissertation. Approximately half of the students that enter doctoral programs abandon before getting their degree, and, in the US, those who complete it take in average 8 and ½ years to do so. Such statistics put in question the adequacy of doctoral training as preparation for professional academic work.

Read:

“Mentoring”, in Cary Nelson & Stephen Watt, *Academic Keywords — A Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education*, Routledge, 1999.

Phil Agre, “Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School,” May 2001.

<http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/grad-school.html>