

Professional Development in the Modern Urban University^[i]

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Abstract

Faculty members in urban universities face both special challenges and unique opportunities. Greater respect for urban universities produces greater expectations, and, inevitably, greater stress from both within and without, and this makes the cultivation of faculty resources more important than ever. By widening and deepening professional preparation, developing models that make faculty careers more flexible, recognizing and rewarding differential faculty contributions, promoting more leadership in place, and developing more sophisticated knowledge about human learning, professional development programs are poised to play a more important and powerful role than ever before.

For many years faculty members in urban universities have been well aware of the special challenges they face. Each year, it seems, they are greeted by a student body that is more diverse in age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and preparedness than that of the previous year. Their students have multiple obligations and conflicting demands on their time; most of them don't give a hoot about the "college experience" and they have little patience for learning that is not clearly relevant to their career goals.

These are challenges for which most new faculty are unprepared. Most often, their graduate faculty mentors consider placement of their protégés anywhere other than in a traditional research university a disappointment, if not an outright failure. Getting hired at an institution that falls short of one's (and one's mentor's) expectations is not the most auspicious way to begin one's professional career—but that is what many young faculty hired at urban universities have faced over the past thirty years.

New faculty at urban universities have also discovered a whole new set of academic rules, both written and tacit. They are university faculty and so are expected to publish. That part of the message is clear, and expected. But they hear other, mixed messages:

- We're an urban university, so we expect engaged scholarship—but don't do any sloppy "action" research because you'll want to publish in the most prestigious refereed journals.
- We're an urban university, so we expect teaching excellence—student retention is one of our strategic priorities—but don't work so hard on your teaching that it detracts from your scholarly agenda. Wait until you're tenured, then work on your teaching.

- We're an urban university, so professional and community service is essential—but we'll try to protect you from having too many service responsibilities because, after all, that's not what will get you tenured and promoted.

I exaggerate, but not much. And if all this weren't enough, faculty at urban universities face several additional teaching challenges:

- Because the real or virtual classroom is the center of campus life for many students, faculty are expected to meet the demand for online courses and distance education for students not interested in spending a lot of time on campus.
- Faculty are strongly encouraged to incorporate significant service learning components into their courses, requiring not only substantial front-end training but also the greater time investment that working with community partners and non-traditional learning assessments requires.
- Because urban universities employ relatively large numbers of adjunct and part-time faculty, drawn from the city's professional ranks, full-time faculty must learn to coordinate their curricula with colleagues whom they seldom, if ever, see.

If all of this seems impossibly difficult, other, more potentially positive counter-forces are also at work. We are at a point of genuine transformation in higher education, one that holds great promise for urban universities, or “universities of opportunity,” as Joe Marolla (personal communication, 2006) calls them. True, observers of higher education have been writing about the need for transformative change for most of the past half-century. There has been such a chorus of voices, in fact—from commission reports, professional association initiatives, scholars and seasoned academic leaders, all referring to some “crisis” or other in higher education—that they almost numb the senses. But despite the life-cycle of crises in higher education, most of which have come and gone (Birnbaum 2000), American higher education today faces challenges to traditional campuses that will not go away, challenges that will force a transformation unlike anything seen before. My argument quite simply is this: More than any other kind of institution, urban universities are poised to take best advantage of the transformation; and so now is the time to begin preparing faculty for these new roles, before their institutions become overwhelmed by the forces of the marketplace, in ways harmful not only to the academy but to the communities they serve.

Change Forces: A collision of three forces—the democratization of knowledge, the digital revolution, and the growing diversity of needs and aspirations among prospective students, all against a backdrop of severely constrained resources—will have a profound impact on the lives of faculty, what they do, on the options open to them, and on the professional life that most will lead. These forces, affecting all universities—but specially urban universities—are discussed in more detail below, beginning with changes in students.

Democratization of access. College enrollment in 2010 will have increased by more than three million students from what it was in 2000, mostly due to formerly under-represented groups (Diamond and Wergin 2001). Whereas having a college degree once was considered to be a sufficient but not necessary condition for moving up the economic ladder, the situation is reversed today. Higher education is considered necessary for economic success, but insufficient to guarantee it. Students are therefore more “instrumental” than they used to be, less interested in the college experience than in gaining a competitive edge in the marketplace. Social pressure to be college-educated is increasing. Already, broad agreement exists that a high school diploma has been replaced by at least two years of post-secondary education as the minimum educational credential. Pressure for better student academic support will continue to increase, but without commensurate financial support to institutions the result will be pressure to deliver education more “efficiently.”

The digital revolution. The influence of technology has attracted more attention from higher education pundits than any other force for change. Some recent essays, with their grim warnings about how traditional higher education risks having its core functions usurped by high-tech providers of Web-based learning, border on the hysterical (Levine 2000). At the same time such respected authorities as Robert Zemsky and William Massy (2004) have concluded that distance learning doesn’t deserve all the hype—that while it could have significant payoff in student learning if well conceived and utilized, performance to date has fallen well short of early promises.

Nonetheless, it’s clear that technology is forcing major changes in educational delivery. Online digital technology has weakened traditional geographic student catchment areas, resulting in an academic free-for-all, with dozens of institutions capable of entering the academic marketplace, advertising online degrees that can be earned largely at home. This competition has spawned an increasing number of cooperative agreements between public and private programs and mergers between institutions hoping to reduce operating costs. In addition, the for-profit sector is, not surprisingly, going after the traditional “cash cows” of institutions, their undergraduate and graduate programs in business and management, a strategy that has already resulted in income and budget shortfalls as campuses have had to make huge budget outlays just to keep up with maintaining the basic technology infrastructure that the modern university needs.

The democratization of knowledge. The technological revolution is part of, and has contributed to, a larger and more powerful cultural transformation. Colleges and universities once were elite repositories of knowledge; they were places where people went to partake of erudition and specialized expertise and where professors “professed.” Because of the GI Bill and the Civil Rights Act, the last fifty years have witnessed an enormous change in access to the academy, making the elite available to nearly everyone. In the past few years this democratization of access has been joined by the democratization of *information*; the explosive growth of technology has made the traditional notion of the academic library as a strictly physical place all but

obsolete. Thus, libraries, and the universities that house them, are becoming increasingly virtual spaces.

And so the inevitable question arises: If colleges and universities are not the elite fonts of knowledge that they used to be, then what are they for? What social purpose should they serve? And more to the point of this article, if the principal reason for having faculty members is no longer to maintain, control, and profess the knowledge base, then what social purpose should *faculty* serve?

How Urban Campuses Should Respond

Urban campuses are positioned to take good advantage of these change forces, with manifest implications for faculty development. First of all, despite the sharp and sometimes shrill calls for higher education reform, the general public's regard for higher education is remarkably high, as demonstrated in a survey undertaken by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2002. Where the public has problems is with the academy's priorities; people want less focus on research and economic development and more on the basics: general education, leadership and civic responsibility, and teacher training. These public priorities should be the mother's milk of urban universities.

Second, urban universities should avoid short-range actions that, while maybe appealing in the short term, take them down the wrong paths. They should not encourage faculty work that will lead to further disengagement of faculty from students and from each other and to further exacerbation of status differences. This is never done on purpose, of course, but beware of unintended consequences resulting from short-term cost-saving measures such as hiring adjuncts or increasing class size and making these permanent policies. Beware also of adopting curricular strategies that focus too heavily on professional skill-building at the expense of an emphasis on reflection and inquiry. If urban universities want to create settings for important and sometimes difficult conversations, settings that foster true critical reflection, then they must model those settings themselves. They must promote a vision of faculty as *models of learning* rather than *models of erudition* and a vision of the university as a place—not just a virtual place—that fosters a true democracy of ideas.

Third, urban universities should acknowledge that a huge and potentially positive force for change lies within the faculty population itself. By the end of this decade higher education will experience the greatest faculty turnover in more than thirty years, due both to retirements of the large numbers of faculty members hired in the 60s boom and to the hiring of new faculty to meet the enrollment crunch. The turnover will be more than just in numbers; two other significant trends are upon us:

- We are witnessing a generational shift among new faculty, who as a group are significantly less willing than their elders to sacrifice their personal lives in the pursuit of tenure. These new faculty, increasingly female (nearly half of all new hires) and more ethnically diverse, are demanding a workplace that supports a more integrated lifestyle. These new faculty see themselves more

often as independent agents, not tied to a particular institution but rather to a set of more personal criteria, such as location and career flexibility (Gappa, Austin, and Trice 2005).

- An astonishing percentage of new full-time faculty, more than half and rising, are being hired into “off-track” appointments and devote a much greater proportion of their time to teaching. The huge bulge of faculty members hired in the 1960s and early 1970s now nearing retirement age will only accelerate these trends (Schuster and Finkelstein 2006).

Implications for Faculty Development

In March of 2006 The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching held an invited symposium on “Professional Development in and for a Changing Academy.” The product of the symposium was a set of six principles recognizing “the need to address both work and work-life issues throughout the full arc of the academic career, from graduate education through retirement, and serving both full- and part-time faculty, with and without tenure-track positions” (Hutchings, Huber, and Golde 2006, 1). While the principles were written to encompass all of higher education, they apply with particular force to urban universities. I’ll first quote the principle, then indicate how I think it applies to urban campuses.

1. “Begin [professional development] in college and intensify in graduate school.”

Professional development should not be limited to new faculty members and those having problems with their teaching but broadened to reach back into the “preparation culture.” While the Carnegie panel doesn’t say so, Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) programs (Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, and Weibl 2000) have enjoyed great success in preparing graduate students for a range of career possibilities and a variety of faculty roles. Urban universities can be significant players in changing the preparation culture in ways that better attract and prepare students for careers at urban institutions, both by sponsoring PFF programs themselves and by partnering with graduate programs in other universities. One of the most powerful elements of PFF is the opportunity for students to gain experience by working with senior faculty mentors who help them learn how faculty life works. This is especially important for prospective faculty at urban universities, who first must understand how different these campuses can be from their own graduate departments and then must learn to appreciate the special opportunities and challenges that faculty work at an urban campus can present.

2. “Provide flexibility for work-and-life issues throughout the academic career.”

“Work-life balance” has become the latest hot topic in discussions about faculty work: witness theme issues on the subject in both *Academe* (November/December 2004) and *Change* magazine (November/December 2005). As I noted earlier, demands on faculty life continue to expand. These collide with values associated with the generational shift, with men and women who are trying to balance work with family life, most of whom are now part-time or non tenure-track and thus have to deal with both significantly less job security and lower salaries. Stresses can be especially intense in urban universities where faculty members often feel as if they have to do it all: teach large and diverse

classes creatively and well, engage their communities, and still produce top-drawer scholarship. Universities have two options: decrease the stress or increase the support. Because urban universities typically have highly ambitious agendas, the former option is unrealistic; thus the key is to increase the support for faculty. “Work” support can take the form of a strong and vibrant academic community, grants and sabbaticals for learning new skills, mentoring opportunities, and flexible work assignments (see Principle 3 below). “Life” support should include affordable and accessible child care, liberal leave policies, and removal of implicit penalties for academics unwilling to sacrifice family life for the sake of career advancement.

3. “Recognize, develop, and reward multiple talents and contributions.”

As the Carnegie report notes, the expansion of faculty work into multiple roles means that individual faculty members cannot be expected to do *everything* well. One of the best ways to increase faculty satisfaction, and therefore productivity, is for the institution to create and implement formal policies on differentiated faculty work (McMillin and Berberet 2002). Such policies make it clear that faculty will be evaluated according to how each person contributes to the work of his or her academic unit. To be effective, differentiation requires that the academic unit define and negotiate its collective work and then asks individual faculty to negotiate with their departmental colleagues how they will contribute to the accomplishment of that work, in ways that take best advantage of their experience, skills, and interests (Wergin 2003). Differentiated faculty workload policies are even more crucial in urban universities with their multiple missions. The problem is that progress toward differentiation has been glacial—primarily because the “reward system” at most institutions continues to value academic *merit* (contributions to the discipline or profession) over academic *worth* (contributions to the institution). In my opinion, the single most chronic challenge to professional development programs has been the academy’s inability to bring about the alignment of faculty roles with faculty rewards. Nowhere is this alignment needed more urgently than in urban institutions, where professional development centers could, if they chose, play an extraordinarily important role by broadening their focus from individual faculty to institutional policy.

4. “Foster long-term planning and preparation.”

The panel underscored how faculty needs change as their careers unfold. They recommended that professional development provide opportunities for learning throughout the faculty career, in such areas as the scholarship of teaching and participation in interdisciplinary networks and civic engagement projects. Here again, opportunities for professional development at urban universities are rich and unequalled. Unlike the hermetic environment of many colleges, urban campuses are surrounded by multiple opportunities to apply what Donald Schön (1995) called the “wisdom of practice.” Faculty members early in their careers will need some assistance identifying connections between their specialized knowledge and scholarship-of-practice opportunities. Two recent studies of community engagement (Wergin 2006; Creighton 2006) reveal that college faculty often hesitate to get involved in their communities *in their roles as faculty*. There are at least three reasons for this. First is what for many is the uncomfortable insight that an accumulated wisdom exists beyond

the campus, which they may not even be aware of, much less privy to. Second, many faculty aren't used to the rough-and-tumble of community politics, or they find it difficult to communicate with community partners who expect more direct answers to their questions than the nuanced, probabilistic phrasing faculty are used to. And third, the on-the-ground challenges of cultural diversity cannot be pushed aside or dealt with in abstract, postmodern terms. Professional development initiatives can help break the ice. More senior faculty, particularly those who have spent much of their careers within the confines of traditional scholarship, are often ripe for a change, something that appeals to a more generative impulse later in life. This is what propels many senior faculty to a greater focus on service roles, both within the institution and beyond it.

5. “Cultivate leadership throughout faculty careers.”

This is a recommendation that holds no special relevance for faculty at urban universities, but it is vitally important all the same. Elsewhere I have written about the urgent need for “leadership in place” among college faculty (Wergin 2007). Faculty who aspire to leadership roles have to contend with the skepticism, sometimes even derision, of their peers. They are described as “crossing over” to administration. They are assumed to have venal motives, such as the desire for a larger office, a full-time assistant, and a higher salary. They are assumed to be power-hungry. And most psychologically damaging, aspiring academic leaders have to live with the suspicion by others that they want a leadership position because they can't “cut it” doing teaching or research. It's a wonder that we have as many talented academic leaders as we do. A different form of leadership is needed, one that encourages academic professionals to participate more effectively in reframing and rebuilding the changing social covenant of the academy, one that would begin to bridge the gulf between faculty and administration that has become so toxic under what some have called the “managerial culture” (Levine 2000). A shift in attitude is needed about leaders and leadership—from a hierarchical view that academic leadership flows from a leadership *position*, to a much more lateral view that leadership *roles* are available to everyone. An important role for professional development, therefore, is also *leadership* development, and not just for aspiring administrators but also for rank and file faculty who see a need for leadership, who step forward and respond, and then gladly step back.

6. “Strengthen networks that encourage learning.”

This recommendation is where urban universities are positioned best of all. One of the most powerful ways to address the collision of social forces mentioned earlier in this article is to develop a more networked academy. By “networked” the panel means engaged in discussions about topics of common interest within the institution, connections with national initiatives, and collaborations with community partners. Opportunities for urban institutions are obvious. Urban communities plagued with seemingly intractable problems are looking to these campuses for help in their own backyards. Urban leaders have become considerably more sophisticated in their view of what the academy can offer them—not just specialized expertise in the form of in-and-out consultation but also more intense partnerships calling for creativity and analytical problem-solving skills. The key word here is “partnerships.” In a true

collaboration, both parties are learners, a truism that university faculty can be slow to grasp. In a study of community partners' criteria for effective partnerships, Creighton (2006) discovered that significant divides existed in partnerships regarding service learning, relevance of academic research, and equitable treatment of community partners. Regarding service learning Creighton writes:

The [community partners] perceived a serious lack of organization in service learning programs. While some faculty or service learning coordinators had begun to establish relationships with the participants, the prevailing experience was that all too often students initiated contact with the community partner and had little preparation from their faculty. Furthermore, the students had little understanding of the purpose of the experience aside from the required number of service hours to graduate or pass a class. Community partner participants also acknowledged that students were ambivalent about the service requirement, having put little or no thought into the type of service experience they were interested in and the value of the experience. The participants expected students to have been adequately informed and the process to be orchestrated in a professional and collegial fashion. Instead, they experienced situations in which students arrived with a sense of entitlement, unwilling to perform certain work they deemed as menial (2006, 133-134).

If professional development has as one of its ultimate purposes the improvement of student learning, then it would appear that a good deal of professional development has yet to be done.

To the above list of six principles I would add a seventh. Teaching the “new majority” of students in urban universities—namely returning adults, part-time students, and persons of color—requires a far greater sophistication with adult learning theory than is now the case. The traditional academic culture has operated under what the great emancipatory educator Paulo Freire (1985) called the “banking model” of education, in which the goal of teaching is to deposit information into students’ presumably empty brains. The entire higher education structure has been built around the banking model: the emphasis is on faculty teaching rather than on students learning; students “bank” credits according to time spent in class; faculty members focus their teaching on “covering the material.” Faculty development programs in urban universities, which already embrace a constructivist model of learning, need to redouble their efforts to help faculty understand that students do not just take in knowledge and store it, but rather “construct” knowledge using already-developed cognitive schema. The consequences of this learning model for educational design are enormous.

- Students come to any educational experience with already well-developed notions of how the world works. These knowledge structures must be a starting point for learning.
- A critical function of education is to help students build on some of these knowledge structures while reconstructing others.

- Teaching and learning is a highly interactive process; instructors and students are both teachers and learners.
- People learn most deeply by acting upon new information, using it in ways that connect to their own experience.
- Some, even most, of the important and memorable learning takes place outside of formal educational settings.
- Transfer of learning to new situations is not automatic, but must *itself* be learned. “Life-long learning” will not happen on its own (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 2007).

To the extent that the above principles hold for adult learners in general, they are doubly true for students on urban campuses. Faculty, therefore, need to be very deliberate about designing settings in which the most effective learning can occur. Recent research in cognition indicates that “deep” learning, that is, important learning that lasts, comes about when two things happen: when, first, we are faced with a problem that cannot be resolved using current knowledge perspectives; and when, second, we are given an opportunity to examine alternative knowledge perspectives *through discourse with others*. These conversations must occur in a setting where people experience the right combination of challenge and support, of the provocative and the comfortable. Recent research points to the powerful impact groups of students and faculty from diverse backgrounds can have on learning, when people are invited to try on other ways of thinking without risk to themselves or to their egos (Mezirow and Associates 2000).

Conclusion

I spent more than 30 years of my academic career on an urban campus, most of it doing faculty development work, and like many others I grew weary of hearing about the “potential” of the urban university, about how it was the “university of the twenty-first century.” Now here we are, well into the twenty-first century, and while much of that ballyhooed potential is being realized, major challenges remain. Urban universities are becoming known less for their attempts to emulate their elite sister institutions and more for their innovation and leadership. Greater respect produces greater expectations, and, inevitably, greater stress from both within and without. All of this makes the cultivation of faculty resources more important than ever. By widening and deepening professional preparation, developing models that make faculty careers more flexible, recognizing and rewarding differential faculty contributions, promoting more leadership in place, and developing more sophisticated knowledge about human learning, professional development programs in urban universities are poised to help finish the transformation.

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