

# The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology

---

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 1

---

March 2015

## The Professional Solution to the College Bubble

Melvyn L. Fein

*Kennesaw State University*, [mfein@kennesaw.edu](mailto:mfein@kennesaw.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps>

---

### Recommended Citation

Fein, Melvyn L. (2015) "The Professional Solution to the College Bubble," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol7/iss1/1>

This Refereed Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

# **Bureaucracy versus Professionalism in Higher Education**

(2014)

Melvyn L. Fein, Ph.D.  
Kennesaw State University

## *Abstract*

*In recent years the size of college administrations has grown twice as quickly as the size of faculties. This is symptomatic of a larger problem. Higher education has become excessively rule-bound and in the process bureaucracy has infringed upon the discretion that professors require to teach with the requisite professionalism. The problem is especially acute with respect to what has been described as "accountability." Strangely this demand rarely seems to be applied to organizational supervisors, whereas it has been used to discipline members of the faculty. In order to understand what has gone wrong, we need to contrast the bureaucratic and professional models of organization as they pertain to colleges and universities. When we do, it becomes plain that what may suit an industrial enterprise is misplaced if comprehensively applied to academe.*

## **A College Bubble?**

Several short years ago the United States experienced a housing bubble. The value of American homes dropped precipitously when too many mortgage loans went toxic. Today many observers fear that something comparable is occurring vis-à-vis American colleges and universities (Reynolds, 2012). A large number are afraid that these too have been oversold. With costs going up and quality going down, they worry about the future institutions that are critical to our shared well-being.

Sometimes mentioned as problematic, but rarely appreciated vis-à-vis the extent of damage it has done is the on-going bureaucratization of academe. In recent years, schools both large and small, public and private, have witnessed a surge in administrators. In many cases, this has resulted in larger numbers of

supervisors on campus than professors. Indeed, the number of administrators has grown almost twice as quickly as that of professors (Ginsberg, 2011).

This, unfortunately, has produced a skew that is threatening the integrity of higher education. Faculty members who, first and foremost, perceived themselves as scholars and teachers once ran our nation's colleges. In fact, the term college originally referred to the fact that they collectively set the standards by which these schools operated (Pedersen, 1997). Now, however, professors are apt to be treated as employees who are bound to do the bidding of their hierarchical superiors. That this is so is exemplified by the much higher salaries administrators are able to command.

All in all, this introduces rigidities and displaced goals that that redound against the interests of both students and society. Instead of bureaucratization creating educational efficiencies alleged by its supporters, it actually undermines the essence of what colleges and universities should be. They become less about expanding advanced knowledge and transmitting this effectively to the younger generation and more about following arbitrary rules. The upshot is that their reputations have been tarnished and they are less socially valued—ergo the potential bubble (Fein, 2014).

### **The Bureaucratic Model**

Sociologists owe their fundamental insights into the nature of bureaucracy to Max Weber (Gerth and Mills, 1946). His model of how this form of organization operates still provides the foundation of contemporary understandings. It, therefore, makes sense to review the basics of his archetype before exploring how it applies to higher education. Weber assumed that this mode of doing business was essential to promoting efficiency and rationality. Not only was it regarded as effective in controlling large numbers of persons such that they could coordinate their efforts in pursuing a common goal, but it was taken for granted that it would ensure that they when about this in the most productive manner available.

Bureaucracy was about calculating the most effective ways of achieving desired endpoints and then making sure these were implemented. The methods might deprive individuals of some of their freedom, but this “iron cage” was compensated for by the wealth it produced; wealth that could then be shared with those who helped produce it. This approach to social organization was, therefore, liable to succeed in comparison with seat-of-the pants traditional methods. In direct competition, the one would swamp the other with superior products created at lower costs.

Bureaucracies are said to achieve their magic by incorporating six crucial features. First, they specify a shared organizational goal. Nowadays this is often operationalized as a mission statement to which all employees are required to owe their allegiance. Second, they break down the tasks to be performed into a functional division of labor. Rather than every participant do everything, complex operations are split into smaller segments in which it is possible to individuals to attain significant proficiencies. As Adam Smith (1776) argued centuries ago with respect to his famous pin factory, this sort of specialization tends to increase efficiency.

Third, the tasks identified as separable must then be assigned to particular persons who have been vetted to ascertain their suitability. These persons are subsequently delegated “defined offices,” which is to say “jobs” that are fleshed out in “job descriptions.” This way the participants can be clear as to their responsibilities, while at the same time being able to respect the responsibilities allocated to others. Fourth, these assignments may then be coordinated, and supervised, via a specified hierarchy of authority. Particular individuals are appointed to oversee what others accomplish. These persons are allowed to exercise greater power, but only if they do so within the parameters of their positions. This way all involved understand who is to report to whom—and about which activities. No interference in a subordinated personal life is to be allowed. As a result, conflict is reduced, while synchronization is improved.

Fifth, because Weber believed in rationality, he also believed that some modes of operation were recognizably more efficient. These procedures and methods were, therefore, the ones the organization should adopt. They were to be identified by those in authority, who then demanded that those they oversaw implement these. Individual discretion was thereby to be limited in favor of what was later described as “scientific management” (Taylor, 1911). Sixth, and last, the complexity of these operations required that they be assiduously documented. Extensive files and records were to be maintained so that those in charge could keep track of what was done—or perhaps left undone. Functioning essentially as the memory of the organization, these documents would allow everyone to remain on the same page without having to rely on the imperfect memories of individuals who might come and go.

Bureaucratization, by these means, provided an avenue to standardization calculability and predictability (Ritzer, 2011). Individuals up and down the chain of command could, as a result, be held accountable for keeping up their end of the enterprise. Because it was known what they were supposed to achieve and also because what they achieved was monitored, their successes and failures could be accurately quantified. This then became a channel for imposing discipline. Thanks to the fact that what the parties accomplished was measurable, if they failed to measure up, they could be sanctioned. The result would be to motivate superior efforts from workers who might otherwise be inclined to shirk.

So effective has this approach been in practice that bureaucracies have become the norm in almost every large-scale organization. In government agencies, industrial giants, commercial operations, military units, and religious communities they have provided a coherence and effectiveness that their less organized predecessors could not equal. The question that arises is thus: Is this the only way to effectively organize large organizations? And more specifically: Is it the appropriate way to organize colleges and universities? Is there perhaps another model of coordinating large-scale endeavors that might serve more effectively?

## **The Professional Model**

Too often it is assumed that bureaucracy is the sole avenue whereby large enterprises can be controlled—and this includes contemporary higher education. Moreover, it is frequently taken for granted that the lone alternative is the arbitrary and capricious rule of autocrats. While it is true that bureaucracy did, by and large, supplant the unenlightened and sometimes venal decision-making of traditional leaders, there is, in fact, another mode of coordination and control available. Usually associated with independent agents, it too is capable of harmonizing and enhancing the efforts of large numbers of participants. That paradigm is the professional model (Larson, 1977).

Professionalism has been with us since the European Middle Ages. It was then exclusively applied to physicians, lawyers, and clerics. The social contributions of each of these occupations were deemed so essential that those who entered them were thought to require a “calling” directly from God. They were to do what they did, not because they sought personal wealth or glory, but because they were dedicated to achieving objectives sanctified by the Lord himself.

Nowadays this religious motivation has generally lapsed among those designated professionals. Although they continue to be regarded as performing important work, their dedication must therefore come from another source. On the whole, this commitment derives from the contemporary nature of professionalism. What these individuals do, the knowledge and skill they require to do it, and the means by which they acquire these attributes, combine to shape unique professional identities. As a consequence, who they become in the process of entering their professions so shapes their personal motives that like their predecessors they too can be trusted with crucial responsibilities (Hughes, 1958).

Let us therefore review the fundamental aspects of professionalism (Greenwood, 1957). First, professionals are the custodians of complex, and frequently, theoretical knowledge. What they are required to understand is so demanding that it is typically beyond the capacities or the commitment of most

humans. Moreover, this is normally esoteric knowledge. In other words, it is usually not the sort of material that would be acquired during the course of ordinary living. Furthermore, professionals themselves are generally responsible for expanding the boundaries of their respective specialties. Many of them engage in research and erudition such that they become the originators—and the guardians—of critical information. Physicians provide a classic example of this sort of commission. They know far more about how the body works, why its functions sometimes become disturbed, and how these may be returned to normal operation.

Second, as a result of their advanced understandings, professionals are delegated authorities that are denied others. Thus, they are allowed to engage in activities that were others to attempt, they might get into legal difficulties. Physicians, for example, are permitted to prescribe medications and to perform operations that in the hands of laypersons would be deemed criminal. In addition, professionals are accorded a level of respect and deference that are withheld from their less knowledgeable peers. People not only go to doctors when they are ill, they listen to their recommendations and follow these prescriptions to a degree they would not were they issued by friends and relatives. Doctors, in short, are treated as superior beings who deserve to have power and influence in the areas of their specialty.

Third, the unique knowledge that confers this singular esteem is derived from a demanding period of socialization and from immersion in a professional culture. Professionals are not born; they are made. Their innate abilities may be genetic, but these must be cultivated if they are to be converted into a professional status. Nowadays, for most professionals, this process begins with a lengthy interlude of formal education (Fein, 2014). Because there is so much to learn, many years intentional study have to be devoted to incorporating these materials. In the case of physicians, this generally includes four years of undergraduate studies, four years in medical school and perhaps another four years of residency and advanced training. Part of this process will include an internship whereby the student doctor gets to practice his/her new vocation so as to internalize its requirements.

This, however, does not end the process of professionalization. Upon achieving their new status, professionals are required to participate in a community of other professionals. They are expected to attend conferences, to read professional literature, and to submit to the judgment of their peers. In brief, they will be exposed to professional sanctions for the entirety of their careers. If they do not keep up, and if they do not perform their responsibilities with the requisite discipline, their professional reputations may be in tatters. This might not seem terribly significant, but for individuals who have devoted many arduous years to attaining an admired status, it can be devastating. In the end, this helps sustain their motivation to be good at their “calling.” Consequently, most do not require a spiritual commitment in order to maintain their efforts.

Fourth, because professionals usually know more, and care more, about their chosen fields, they are allowed a large measure of self-discipline. When professionals stray from their responsibilities, they may be held to account to their peers. Accordingly, unethical doctors may find themselves found guilty of malpractice by other physicians. As a result, they can be stripped of their licenses to practice medicine—or perhaps to be granted privileges by a hospital. Professionals also have considerable control over hiring other professionals and awarding them advanced positions. Because professionals are the ones best situated to judge the competence of their colleagues, their decisions generally carry more weight than those of laypersons. It is well understood that their special knowledge provides insights others do not possess.

Fifth, and finally, professionals are required to subscribe to a code of ethics. Precisely because they have so much control over their own activities, they are expected to maintain an allegiance to higher standards. These are to be deeply ingrained and to guide the day-to-day decision-making of professionals if they hope to remain in good standing. For physicians, this entails living up to the Hippocratic oath and above all refraining from doing their patients any harm. Other professionals have similar protocols in which they are instructed and to which they are obliged to conform. It is, of course, well understood that professionals often fail



to honor these demands, and that they may even bend over backwards to protect their peers from the mandatory penalties; nevertheless, these ethical standards exercise considerable influence. Once again, to violate them would place a professional's hard-won status in jeopardy.

To put the matter succinctly, professionals tend to be self-motivated experts in their areas of concern (Kohn and Schooler, 1983). They are internally driven to be unusually competent at their respective tasks and therefore can be trusted to be self-policing. This means that professionals are allowed to be self-supervising. Historically, they have been independent practitioners whose expertise and dedication were considered so great as to permit a great deal of independence. Who, after all, was going to ensure that doctors and lawyers lived up to their demanding obligations if not themselves? Ordinary workmen could be overseen to make certain that they complied with a supervisor's demands, but what non-medical or non-legal supervisor had sufficient knowledge so as to determine if a professional's responsibilities had been adequately met?

In addition, were professionals denied this independence, what sorts of individuals would be motivated to endure the grueling socialization needed to enter these fields? One of the most powerful reasons for becoming a professional is to exercise discretion over one's work (Simon, 1947). To interfere with this control and place the professional within the same sort of iron cage as the bureaucratic underling eliminates the freedom that confers higher status and therefore the incentive to pursue a special expertise. Bureaucracy, on the other hand, requires a routinization that is not possible in activities with large numbers of uncertainties. These tasks demand an ability, and a willingness, to exercise competent discretion that are unlikely to be sought if they bring no special rewards. What is worse, those not personally motivated to exercise competent discretion are apt to be incompetent. If they do not personally care about doing a good job, the chances of their doing one are not very great.

The professional model therefore stands in stark contrast to the bureaucratic model. It provides control over critical activities, but it does so via significantly

different channels. The Weberian model employs hierarchy and precisely defined rules in order to achieve compliance with activities that meet complex organizational goals. The professional model, in contrast, employs personal motivation and individual discretion to accomplish similar ends. Neither may be totally sufficient to realize every desired objective, but within the spheres where they are most relevant they generally produce acceptable results. Thus, within the kind of industrial organization Weber had in mind, a bureaucratic form of coordination may be superior, whereas within more complex and variable operations a professional form of coordination might be preferable (Bok, 2013).

Furthermore, there is no reason why the bureaucratic and professional models cannot work in tandem. Even within a single organization some activities can be bureaucratized, while others are professionalized. Given the different sorts of mentality that are involved, this may result in an uneasy alliance; nonetheless it can be a workable one. Indeed, this may well be the case within higher education. Bureaucrats and professionals can be—and frequently are—at odds. Each may seek to intimidate the other, yet each may be best suited for their own unique responsibilities. There may, however, be a great deal of sniping along the borders, as well as concerted efforts to engage in organizational imperialism. This latter seems to be the case in higher education where bureaucratic administrators are currently engaged in encroaching on areas that have traditionally been within the professional mandate (Ginsburg, 2011).

### **Bureaucracy within Academe**

Colleges and universities are no longer small places (Thelin, 2011). They have far outgrown the intimate precincts of their ancestral roots. For example, Harvard, when it was in its infancy, boasted a few dozen students and a handful of professors. Everyone knew everyone else and both academic and housekeeping decisions could be presided over by faculty members in concert. They could talk things over and promulgate regulations, let us say, about living arrangements. Those days, however, are long gone. Some colleges, to be sure, remain tiny, but the most influential of contemporary schools have student bodies in the tens of

thousands and faculties in the many hundreds. This precludes the kind of decision-making that was once common.

The upshot is that it is no longer feasible for college professors to oversee all activities needed to maintain organizational integrity. If faculty members are to be competent in their specialties, they cannot supervise the day-to-day operations of, let us say, student dormitories. To do so would take so much time and effort that little would be left over for research and/or pedagogical preparation. As a result, all large colleges and universities delegate these operations to non-academic personnel. These are employees of the university, but they are not part of its academic core.

These non-academic tasks include everything from overseeing dining rooms, to collecting student fees, to building new structures, to policing the grounds, to cleaning the bathrooms, to supervising parking, to soliciting funds from alumni, to complying with federal regulations, to settling the details of the college budget, to buying books for the library, and to acquiring athletic equipment for the school's teams. Without such housekeeping operations, colleges would grind to a halt. These chores may not be sexy, but they are essential. Nonetheless, most of these are not particularly complex in their day-to-day operations. Deciding to put up a new classroom building may be complicated, whereas keeping it clean is more predictable. As a consequence, these activities are suitable for bureaucratization.

There are other administrative activities that are more closely related to teaching and research, but that are also fairly routine. These may impinge directly on what professors do, but are better achieved by bureaucratic means. One of these is student registration. Were professors to be directly involved in the nuts and bolts of signing students up for classes, they would be swamped in detail. Yes, they can advise students, and yes they can authorize over-rides, but making sure that a student's bills have been paid or that prerequisites have been met can be time consuming. By the same token, assigning rooms to particular classes requires a centralized system. Professors cannot be allowed to choose their own rooms or the times their classes will meet. Were they to do so, anarchy would reign. Where and

when classes would take place would be unpredictable, with the consequence that teaching and studying would suffer. As seriously, conflicts between faculty members would be endemic. Disputes over rooms would be the norm, with the sometimes already contentious atmosphere of colleges campuses becoming toxic. Only relatively neutral arbitrators, e.g., bureaucrats, can preserve schools from this sort of disaster (Fein, 2014).

Then there are decisions that require both administrative and faculty input. Many of these entail curricular decisions. No school can teach everything to everyone. A certain level of triage is indispensable. But who should engage in this? Administrators have a better grasp of the available resources and often of the demands of external agencies such as state and federal governments, whereas faculty member generally have a better grasp of what can, and needs to be, taught. The solution has often been what is termed “shared governance.” Faculty members will sit on committees that make recommendations, which are usually honored by administrators who have the final say. Frictions frequently develop, but these are usually manageable (Riley, 2011).

Less manageable, however, has been the administrative assumption that bureaucrats are ultimately responsible for the quality of the education a college or university provides. Much as industrial executives believe it is their responsibility to ensure the quality of their products, college presidents, provosts and deans assume that they must make sure that what happens in the classroom meets the expected standards. They, therefore, demand “accountability” (Wildavsky, et al., 2011). Professor’s feet must be held to the fire so as to make certain that they do a competent job. If this requires that administrators promulgate the appropriate standards, that they regularly measure whether faculty members are complying with these, and that they sanction those who fail to conform, they assume this is their duty. As hierarchical superiors, they believe they must impose appropriate rules and regulations and then make certain these are enforced. Without them, they are convinced the organization’s goals would not be met.

Needless to say, most faculty members resent being treated as if they were working on an assembly line. They believe, although many would not put it in these words, that their professionalism is being violated. Most do not agree that administrators have the right to engage in this sort of close supervision and regard it as an unhelpful form of meddling.

### **Professionalism with Academe**

College professors view themselves as professionals. They believe they are the equivalent of doctors and lawyers—and that they have been since at least the time of the medieval European university. When they securitize what it takes to be a professional, they conclude that they more than meet these requirements. As a consequence, most feel disrespected when they are not accorded the traditional rights associated with being professional (Ginsburg, 2011).

A majority of professors would happily point out that they are experts in demanding modes of theoretical knowledge (Hutchings, et al., 2011). Whether they are chemists, mathematicians, sociologists, economists, or historians, they are convinced that they know far more about these subjects than do laypersons. Moreover, they are aware that they and their peers are engaged in expanding the boundaries of their respective disciplines. No one can teach at a contemporary college without being aware of the demands to “publish or perish.” Prospective academics understand that if they are to be hired by an institution of higher education they must be prepared to participate in scholarship and that if they do not, they may either be denied tenure or promotion. To fail to keep up and to continue learning is to become a virtual outcast—to become what is derisively referred to as “dead wood.”

Moreover, for attaining advanced knowledge professors expect to be awarded social power. Indeed, to a large degree, this is the case. First, they are allowed to teach what they know to their students. In this, they are regarded as authorities in their particular areas of expertise. Because they are widely believed know to significantly more than their students, they are awarded deference in the

classroom. They also get to grade these students. The professor, on the basis of his/her expertise is allowed to decide who has learned and who has not. He or she also gets to choose what will be taught and how this will be presented. Beyond this, a professor may be accorded deference outside the classroom. Laypersons frequently seek his or her opinions and he or she may even be hired as a consultant on projects where the appropriate expertise can make the difference between success or failure.

Next, professors are acutely aware of the demanding socialization they have undergone and the community of scholars in which they are embedded. They know that even before they could apply for a job teaching college that had to complete a sound undergraduate degree and then go on to fulfill the requirements for a doctorate. Not only did this entail succeeding in rigorous courses, but they also had to pass comprehensive exams and complete an innovative dissertation to the satisfaction of recognized scholars. Most know that only half of those who begin this program eventually receive a degree because the unrelenting effort and high standards they must endure require levels of ability and commitment that many aspirants do not possess.

Professors are also acutely aware of the scrutiny they receive as members of a professional community. They understand that if they do not attend conferences, or keep up with the professional literature, or write articles that are accepted by peer-reviewed journals, they will be deemed second-rate by their fellow professionals. Even after they have obtained tenure they are motivated to retain their expertise, and probably expand it, because if they were not, they would be disrespected by the people they put in so many years seeking to impress. It must be remembered that college professors are human and thus are gratified when they are appreciated and dismayed when dismissed as inept.

With respect to the self-governance associated with professionalism, faculty members likewise fit the paradigm. Because they are the experts in their respective disciplines, they have a huge say in who gets hired and promoted at the college level. They also, thanks to tenure decisions, get to say who will remain on board. This

means that administrator's have relatively little input about these matters, beyond confirming faculty verdicts. Administrators may be able to make a professors life miserable, but the steps needed to dismiss a faculty member who has not engaged in blatantly immoral conduct (such as stripping naked in class) are difficult to manage with out the cooperation of his or her colleagues.

Lastly, professors have codes of conduct. Each of their disciplines will have professional associations that set standards they are expected to meet. These, like medical codes, are promulgated in the belief that they should discourage activities that harm those outside the field. The idea is to make sure that a professor's authority is not abused to the detriment of others. Nowadays most schools also have institutional review boards (IRBs) on which professors evaluate research proposals to make certain these will not injure those studied or affected by a study.

All in all, professors regard themselves as the self-motivated experts that professionals are expected to be. They therefore believe they deserve to be delegated the authority that has historically been accorded to professionals. This includes control over their academic work. As the persons best qualified to do the jobs they are assigned, they believe they must be permitted to self-supervise. In the past, professionals, such as physicians, have been allowed to make decisions that others are less competent to make. As a consequence, professors believe that this same authority should apply to them.

### **Professionalism versus Bureaucracy in Academe**

Given the conflicting attributes of bureaucracy and professionalism, the question is how can the two divide up their authority within college precincts. There can little doubt that as of this writing there is a great deal of friction between the two models. While both are absolutely essential in accomplishing the mission assigned to our colleges and universities, there is substantial disagreement about where the line should be drawn. College administrators and professors come to very different conclusions. Each side sees things from its own perspective and concludes that its prescriptions best serve the health of higher education.

In recent years the balance has been tipping toward the bureaucrats (Reynolds, 2012). Although most of college administrators begin their careers as academics, a large proportion ultimately comes to identify with their bureaucratic roles. Acutely aware of their organizational responsibilities, they often lose sight of the independent functions of their presumed subordinates. Furthermore, as earlier indicated, over the last several decades the number of administrators has soared. Escalating at almost twice the rate of the professors, in many instances there are now more administrators on campus than faculty members.

Worse still, in many instances the only way for a professor to obtain a substantial increase in income is to become a bureaucrat. Especially at mid-level schools, the bonus for becoming an administrator can double a person's salary. The point is that the incentive is now to opt out of teaching and research in favor of becoming a supervisor. A secondary implication is that this can give administrators an inflated sense of worth. Measuring their value in terms of dollars, they conclude that must be smarter and more insightful than their underlings.

As a consequence, many administrators assume that it is their duty to improve the quality of education that their schools provide (Christensen and Eyring, 2011). They must therefore make certain that what the professors teach is both appropriate and well delivered. As a result, there has been a scramble to impose what are designated "best practices." Much as in the manner of the now discredited scientific management, efforts are made to identify the single best way to teach. This then is to serve as a template from which diverse faculty members are to take their cue. Just as Weberian superiors are asked to devise the appropriate rules and procedures for their organizations, college presidents, provosts, deans and department chairs assume it is incumbent upon them to do the same for professors.

Utterly forgotten in this supposed rush for efficiency is that there might not be one best way to teach (Ambrose, et al., 2010). Different professors may find that different techniques are more suitable for them. Because people differ in their personalities and abilities, so may what they can comfortably implement. Similarly, disciplines and colleges differ in the types of students they address and therefore



how these individuals best learn. What is more, students themselves differ and as a result may benefit from a diverse set of teaching styles.

As significantly, the professional model places control over many crucial decisions in the hands of the professional. In the college setting, this translates into the professor deciding what should be taught and how it should be presented. In fact, as a self-motivated expert in the discipline he or she teaches, he/she is better situated to determine what should happen in the classroom. How, indeed, are administrators who come from different disciplines to make such choices? What makes a dean who was trained as a political scientist think that he/she knows better how to teach psychology than a psychology professor? The odds of this are not good. Although professors can be extremely uneven in their pedagogical abilities, placing administrators in charge is only likely to water down what is achieved. Standardized practices, whether labeled “best” or not, are apt to be too generalized and shallow to be truly inspirational.

Furthermore, to take the discretion out of the hands of the professors is to rob them of the motivation that makes professionalism so powerful an organizational modality. If what faculty members do, and how they do it, is too extensively determined from above, they are likely to become bored and frustrated. Instead of making improvements based on their own expertise, they are then liable to forego developing innovations they may not be allowed to use. As it happens, one of the best ways for professors to stimulate students is for them to teach about their own specialties. Because they care about these matters, their enthusiasm is bound to be infectious. On the other hand, when deprived of this opportunity by cookie-cutter programs all are likely to suffer. They will go through the motions, but the cutting-edge learning that historically made a college education distinctive will have been extinguished before it is able to ignite many minds.

As if this were not sufficiently discouraging, when bureaucrats seek to impose their brainchildren on a docile professoriate, they compound the damage. When convinced that their ways of teaching are superior, they frequently conclude that they have a duty to see that these are executed. Just as industrial managers

caught up in a Theory X mentality assume workers are lazy and will shirk their responsibilities unless they are closely supervised (Gouldner, 1954), so administrators who assume that faculty members will evade hard work if they can are apt to believe they must force professors to do their duty. This mind set has given rise to the “accountability” movement. The point of this crusade is to look over faculty shoulders and then punish them if they fail to perform. Presumably if they are left on their own without the fear of sanctions, they would do as little as possible. In essence, they are not really self-motivated professionals who can be delegated authority for their own activities. They must, as a result, be governed from the outside, which means that professors must regularly prove themselves to their administrative bosses (Wildavsky, et al., 2011).

The upshot is that professors are increasingly required to document their achievements (Ginsburg, 2011). They must thus find ways to demonstrate that their students are learning what they are supposed to. As a result, tedious reports are written, redundant post-tenure reviews are endured, and empty-headed research projects are authenticated. The problem with this approach is that it quickly devolves into a ritualistic game. Because the instruments used are generally poor indicators of what is taking place, they tend to be manipulated. Professors are therefore able to write to the evaluative instrument just as K-12 teachers teach to the test. Worse still, administrators, because they are removed from the scene of the action (i.e., the classroom) and because they may not be familiar with the discipline under review, are not able to judge actual quality. Accordingly, they come to depend upon over-simplified sampling techniques that are difficult to assess.

A case in point is student evaluations. Each term students are asked to fill out forms that rate their professors. These are then summed up and administrators provided with a figure that alleges to measure how well a professor does in particular areas. The difficulty is that these evaluations are largely popularity contests. As research shows, instructors who are well liked tend to do better. Those who are controversial and/or demanding, in contrast, frequently suffer. The upshot is that effectiveness is distorted. Bureaucrats who see only numbers are unable to

determine why the scores came out as they did, yet if they reward those with higher scores, they may encourage professors to go easy on their classes. All in the name of improving quality by making professors “accountable,” they undermine responsible behavior. Yet how would they know.

In sum, the bureaucratic and professional models recurrently come into conflict on college campuses (Delbanco, 2012). What administrators want and what professors desire are not always compatible. Nor is it clear that the expansion of the bureaucratic model has produced the benefits attributed to it. To the degree that professors are denied the ability to supervise their own activities, to this same degree we may be depriving students of a truly higher education. Colleges, like all organizations, must impose controls if they are to accomplish their missions, but this control need not be invested in a traditional bureaucratic chain of command. It can emanate from the dedication of professors who are at least as interested in quality learning as are presidents, provosts, deans, etc.

### **Reconciling Bureaucracy and Professionalism in Academe**

The next question is how can the bureaucratic and professional modes of control be reconciled within the college setting (Taylor, 2010; Hacker and Dreifus, 2010)? Or maybe the question should be: Can these, in fact, be reconciled? At the moment, the bureaucrats seem to have the upper hand. They are the hierarchical superiors and their numbers are growing. What is more, legislation originating from state and local governments continues to encourage further bureaucratization. As regulations—ostensibly aimed at improving educational outcomes—continue to multiply, they demand reams of paperwork, which, as might be supposed, are the province of the administrators. These hierarchical superiors can therefore contend that they are only doing what needs to be done. They are merely bowing to the demands of the people as expressed through their political representatives.

College administrators also possess another enormous advantage in vying for power. Exercising control is, in fact, their job. Issuing orders and then seeing to it that these are implemented are what they do for a living. Doing this well is

therefore part of their identity. By well, unfortunately, this does not mean effectively. It only means with apparent success. Sadly one of the best ways to achieve this appearance is through “empire-building.” The more people an administrator supervises and the more programs he or she promulgates, the more potent this person will seem to be (Parkinson, 1996). This provides the incentive to make sure professors remain subordinate. It also ensures that many of the initiatives defended in the name of educational excellence have little to do with improving academic quality.

How then can the professoriate defend itself from the inroads of a determined rival? After all, professors do not spend endless hours contemplating how they can achieve organizational control. For most, the focus of their attention is on their classrooms and/or their scholarship. Nor is this likely to change. Indeed, efforts by professors to increase their influence frequently founder on their bureaucratic innocence. Because they are not immersed in the politics of administration, they often misread what is possible or even how the possible can be achieved.

There is, however, an avenue through which professors can defend, and perhaps expand, their professional control. That pathway is through greater professionalism (Fein, 2011). The high card faculty members possess is their “self-motivated expertise.” It is in this that that they are unique. It is therefore this that enables them to accomplish higher educational objectives more effectively than others—most notably their administrative superiors. But for this to make itself felt, they must be genuinely self-motivated experts. If they merely go through the motions; if they are, for instance, overly concerned with promoting ideological agendas, they forfeit the social legitimacy upon which their power depends. Society has delegated college professors considerable power because it is believed that they are indeed custodians of crucial forms of knowledge. When this is doubted, when it is widely believed that professors are naïve idealists more interested in promoting their pet projects than advancing our shared knowledge, they lose the respect of the public (Kimball, 1990). But it is the public, when it sides with professors, than can

provide a counterbalance against administrative ambitions. When faculty members lose sight of this, they abandon the social status upon which their independence is contingent.

Professionalism possesses a potency that can be maintained only when it is genuine (Fein, 2014). Only if professors know important things that others do not know will they be admired. Only when they are truly dedicated to expanding what they understand and applying it with integrity can they command the respect of others. To be delegated power, one must be perceived as worthy of it. This is not to say that contemporary professors no longer care about their professionalism. Most do. Nevertheless, they must make it plain to others that what they contribute deserves to be preserved. Moreover, they must strengthen their self-motivated expertise such that there is no question that it should remain at the heart of higher education. They, because they are knowledgeable and care about remaining knowledgeable, should be supported when they make pedagogical decisions. They must not become ciphers of out-of-touch administrators who are incapable of replacing what the professors supply.

### **Conclusion**

The bureaucratic and professional models of social control are currently fighting over the soul of higher education (Ginsburg, 2011). Both models have spheres of influence where the manner in which they maintain control is appropriate to the tasks performed. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic model has been making inroads into what has been the traditional preserve of a professionalized professoriate. More man (and woman) power and treasure have been poured into converting our colleges into a high tech version of industrial corporations (Christensen and Eyring, 2011). Instead of teaching and scholarship being strengthened, college faculty members are being treated as unruly children who must be contained lest they do unspeakable damage. Rather than being regarded as professional colleagues due the respect and autonomy of their forebears, they are being brought to heel by efforts to impose “best practices” and “accountability.” Not only are these attempts unnecessary, but they are counter-productive. Instead of

enhancing academic quality, by undercutting the very persons most able to provide it, they reduce what is ostensibly sought.

The virtues of professionalism, especially within academe, do not seem to be fully appreciated. The nature of a self-motivated expertise, as well as its value in providing decentralized controls, have been overlooked in the rush to impose bureaucratic control. That professors who are dedicated to their disciplines can know more and teach better than instructors shackled by fixed rubrics seems to have been forgotten. That such professors can also be more responsive to student needs has also been mistakenly dismissed.

Many of these trends can be countered by again emphasizing the role of professionalism on our campuses. Rather than reject it in the name of efficiency, professors, in particular, should embrace its essence and potential. To do less would soon put us on a course to dismantling higher education as it has been known. The result would be a glorified form of secondary education that was both ruinously expensive and muddle-headed. A check would be put on the sort of learning that only a professionalized professoriate can provide—much to the detriment of all concerned.

### **References:**

- Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C. and Norman, M.K. 2010. *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bok, D. 2013. *Higher Education in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Christensen, C.M. and Eyring, H.J. 2011. *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Delbanco, A. 2012. *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fein, M. 2011. *A Professionalized Society: Our Real Future*. Kindle.

- Fein, M. 2014. *Redefining Higher Education: How Self-Direction Can Save Colleges*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Gerth, H. and Mills, C.W. (Eds.) 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ginsberg, B. 2011. *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Greenwood, E. 1957. "Attributes of a Profession." *Social Work*, II, 3, July.
- Gouldner, A.J. 1954. *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hacker, A. and Dreifus, C. 2010. *Higher Education?: How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do about It*. New York: Times Books.
- Hughes, E.C. 1958. *Men and Their Work*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Hutchings, P., Huber, M.T. and Ciccone, A. 2011. *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kimball, R. 1990. *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Kohn, M.L. and Schooler, C. 1983. *Work and Personality: An Inquiry Into the Impact of Social Stratification*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Larson, M.S. 1977. *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Parkinson, C.N. 1996. *Parkinson's Law*. Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer Books.
- Pedersen, O. 1997. *The First Universities: Stadium Generale and the Origins of University Education in Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reynolds, G.H. 2012. *The Higher Education Bubble*. New York: Encounter Books.
- Riley, N. S. 2011. *The Faculty Lounges: and Other Reasons Why You Won't Get the College Education You Paid For*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

- Ritzer, G. 2011. *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*. (Sixth Edition) Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Simon, H.A. 1947. *Administrative Behavior*. New York: MacMillan.
- Smith, A. 1776. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: W. Strahan & T. Cadell.
- Taylor, F.W. 1911. *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Taylor, M.C. 2010. *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Thelin, R.R. 2011. *A History of American Higher Education*. (Second Edition) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Wildavsky, B., Kelly, A.P. and Carey, K. (Eds.) 2011. *Reinventing Higher Education: The Promise of Innovation*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.