

**The Public Image and the Private Reality of Faculty “what do you care what other people think?”**

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I was going to start these remarks with an adaptation of the classic Ed Koch question: “how [are we] doing?” until a friend reminded me of the dying Arlene Feynman’s quip to her physicist husband Richard Feynman when he was working on the atomic bomb in Los Alamos. She had given him pencils engraved “Richard darling I love *you!* Putsy .” When Feynman told her that he was embarrassed to take the pencils to work, she shot back “Aren’t you proud of the fact that I love you? What do you care what other people think?”

The official theme of this meeting is “The Public Image and the Private Reality of Faculty,” and I want briefly to discuss two recent public opinion surveys on the standing of higher education and the professoriate with the public that Roger Bowen has sent me. I think that there are actually three related questions for us to consider: What do other people think about us? Should we care what other people think about us? If we do care what they think about us, what can or should we do about it?

The first survey. Roger sent me the slides from an American Council of Education presentation entitled “Solutions for our Future” early this spring. They

summarize the results of a public opinion survey (about which I know nothing more) done for the ACE. These are a few of the highlights, as I understand them. First, the positives:

1. The public has a “favorable” view of both higher ed. and colleges/universities by a ratio of 79-19/14%
2. College professors have a 81% approval rating as a profession  
Compared to 92% for physicians, 90% for scientists,  
69% for college presidents and 53% for lawyers and local politicians
3. 84% of the public agree the “investing in higher ed will be critical to solving Many of the problems that face our nation in the coming years
4. 70% of the public thinks that “society as a whole” benefits most from higher
5. 92% agree that “the actions we take today on higher ed policy will be critical to the US competitive leadership in the world 25 years from now

And the negatives:

1. The public believes, 52% to 39%, that we are on the “wrong track”
2. The public rates education as the third leading public issue:  
The economy/jobs 44% (top issue)  
Defense/terrorism 32%  
Education 25%  
Health care 23%  
Social security 16%
3. Improving higher education is the fourth leading policy priority  
Improving K-12 schools is the first
4. 34% of the public think our national higher ed system is better today than a decade ago, 41% think it about the same, and 21% think it worse  
41% think it is worse because it is of “lower quality”  
Yet 60% think that higher ed is “prepared for the future”
5. 49% think that “today’s college professors are more ideological than they should be  
But 49% also think that “colleges and universities share the same values as they (the respondents) do”  
And only 50% think that “students are getting their money’s worth”

I gather from the slides that ACE is encouraged by the survey results. Their jingle appears to be that “We teach the people who solve the problems and change the world,” and their conclusion from their survey is that the public is basically “persuadable” on higher ed., -- it believes that education is a top priority, it believes that ed. benefits

everybody and, especially, that education appeals to males 3-44 yrs of age, and 55 yrs of age and older.

The second survey is the Spencer Foundation funded one about of public attitudes toward faculty undertaken by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons for the AAUP. What does that tell us?

Similar to almost all other recent surveys, it finds there is a high degree of public confidence in higher education– 41.6% have “a lot of confidence,” and 48.7% have “only some confidence” But it finds that there are “significant differences” in confidence by age, education, political party and political ideology:

53.5% of those 18-24 as opposed to 26.8% of those aged 65+ have  
 “a lot of confidence”  
 Only 42.4% of college grads have “a lot of confidence”  
 Only 30.5% Republicans and 26.8% of conservative Republicans have  
 “a lot of confidence” in colleges and universities

This survey rates the occupational prestige of professors lower than the ACE and some other recent surveys:

While 71.9% think physicians are “very prestigious,” only 53.2% think the same of professors and, perhaps surprisingly, only 50.2% think that of K-12 teachers. Lawyers again come in at about one-third.

Gross and Simmons also find that political bias is a problem for higher education, but it is not nearly as important as other problems. 37.5% of respondents think it a serious problem, but:

80.5% think the high cost of tuition is a very serious problem  
 66.2% think that binge drinking by college students is ditto  
 48.9% think that “low educational standards” are ditto  
 45.5% think that crime on campus is ditto

Gross and Simmons, unlike the ACE, asked about tenure and academic freedom. They find that 76.6% think that tenure is a good way to reward accomplished professors, and 69.7% think that tenure is essential to good teaching, but 80.7% also think that tenure sometimes protects incompetent professors.

Most Americans do not think, apparently, that tenure should protect professors holding extreme views. Nevertheless, there is little public support for campaigns to legislate what professors study and teach:

57.1% think that the political views of faculty do not affect how well they teach, though 68.2% believe that universities favor faculty who hold liberal social and political views?

As to content of education, 67.7% favor teaching student's skills they can use in careers, 26.3% favor teaching critical thinking, and only 6% say that the aim is to teach about great works of literature, art, music and philosophy. This is not such good news for those of us who are humanists.

Looking at both surveys, what do we see?

1. Consistently high ratings for both the professoriate and for higher education generally – higher than all professions other than medicine  
AAUP survey shows more ambiguity – we are surprisingly weak with older people and college grads.
2. Both surveys evince concern about the perceived political bias of the professoriate.
3. Both highlight the perceived tension between work preparation vs. critical thinking
- 4.. Both show ambiguous public feelings about what the purpose of higher education is.
- 5 Both show an increasingly prevalent view of higher education as a consumer product. Perhaps this has been exacerbated by the growth of for-profit education. But in any case there is clearly a growing trend to think of higher education as a consumer product. This is the consistent theme of Charles Miller, the chair of the Secretary of Education's Commission on

the Future of Higher Ed, who stresses “the need to accommodate diverse consumer preferences” in framing recommendations for higher education reform.

If “we,” the AAUP, are to react to the public, we need to be sure who “we” are – is there

is a there, here? Consider what divides and distinguishes our communities:

1. Distinction between “ed” and “higher ed” – do we want to distinguish ourselves from K-12 (though the ACE survey indicates that the distinction between teachers and professors is disappearing)
2. There is of course enormous diversity within higher education, from community colleges to research universities, and everything between.
3. What about the rapidly expanding for-profit higher education sector?
4. There is an emerging distinction between distance (or virtual) education and “traditional” higher ed. (whatever that might be).
5. There is clearly an important distinction between “higher education” and “the professoriate,” and there is enormous diversity within the professoriate.

There thus can be no unitary “public” perception of higher education, and correspondingly of the professoriate, although there are multiple stereotypes, each of which is used for specific political and/or rhetorical purposes. Consider the negative ones:

1. Consumerist critique of Chairman Miller – our mission is to serve the economic interests of our students
2. Relatedly, we are an industry not subject to market discipline
3. There is also the “unrealist” critique – we constitute an ivory tower and are out of touch with current reality
4. The political bias stereotype – we are dominated by Left wing political radicals, queers, feminists, mindless diversity lovers, and what have you --David Horowitz and the Student Bill of Rights are the most obvious examples

But of course there are positive stereotypes as well:

1. We represent the values of liberal education, and constitute a resource for training for cosmopolitanism and critical thinking
2. We are an engine for positive social change, and especially the primary vehicle for upward social mobility

3. We are the driver of economic and industrial progress  
(But this has some uncomfortable implications, as seen in the new Texas A&M promotion and reward criteria, which elevate “patents or commercialization of research where applicable” to the same status as teaching, research and service. Is this good news for us?)
4. We are widely thought to be a positive force for social action and social change, for internationalism

So there really isn't a single image of higher ed, and there is a corresponding multiplicity of images of the professoriate – a situation multiplied and complexities by the range of institutional roles for professors within and without their institutions. It is also confused by the multiple audiences in the general public , but we need to pay special attention to essentially internal audiences for the professoriate: students, staff, institutional administrators (who sometimes think of themselves as academics and sometimes not), governing bodies and (especially for the public universities), legislators.

Why should we care? The ACE survey I mentioned is part of an overall public relations effort by ACE to improve the overall national reputation of higher ed. as part of that organization's responsibility to lobby for increased federal aid for higher education. I have no objection to that mission, although it is sometimes in conflict with the educational objectives and values that I am personally committed to. The ACE cares in a specific way.

I suspect that the AAUP cares in a more complex way. My own commitment to AAUP is primarily to its function as the key advocate for academic freedom in higher education, though I recognize that many of you will think that labor issues are as or more important. I think our President cares about both of these issues. But I don't think it is

easy to know what public relations position the organization should take about how to present itself to the relevant audiences on either of the two principal issues that concern us. And it is almost certainly the case that different segments of the general public will see our two issues as in conflict with one another.

Take academic freedom. I could imagine a public relations consultant telling us that we should be very careful about making claims of violation of academic freedom for incidents of “extreme” speech or action, lest we be seen as defenders of leftist (or other activist) extremists. But I doubt that many of you sitting here would accept such advice. I certainly would not. What about our labor relations role? Another consultant might tell us that we are shooting ourselves in the collective foot by putting up with elected presidents who get arrested in support of graduate student strikers. Cary and Jane are not the only people here who would disagree with that – though I suspect that some of you would. And the AAUP has other advocacy issues, none of which has a straightforward relationship to any single “public.”

Is the question really one of how we wish to be perceived as professors belonging to the AAUP? The title of the conference refers to “public realities,” but isn’t the point that there are multiple and multiply-conflicting realities? We all know that we aspire to represent truth and justice (as historically defined by the AAUP) in the professoriate, but we know equally well that significant numbers of professors do not agree with one or more of our operating commitments – and that doubtless a variety of different, significant minorities of “the general public” think that we are not only wrong but dangerous.

Do we therefore say “no more Mr. Nice Guy,” and let the public be damned? “*Après nous le deluge?*” Or worse, do we articulate our narrow institutional interests and let the rest of the professoriate be damned? After all, if I say “AAUP” in ordinary discourse in my little corner of elite academia, I am more likely to be thought referring to “university presses” than “university professors.” What is it we represent and to whom?

I am pretty sure that I have not so far said a single word that has surprised or significantly informed anyone in this room, and I apologize for that. But I really do wonder if worrying about “public perceptions of the professoriate” is our biggest problem? I have only recently begun to reengage with the AAUP, having left early in my career at the time I joined a university labor union. But at the present moment in history I once again see a vital role for the organization both as to academic freedom and as to fair labor practices within a dramatically changing academic marketplace. And I am delighted with our new leadership. But if there is a Big Message to convey to our membership – and to the general public, I am not sure how to formulate it.

Deep down, I think that what we should aspire to do is to represent the wisdom, best practice and conscience of the nation’s professoriate, particularly in our advocacy for freedom of academic speech and action as we see it -- and that in doing so we must strive to represent all post-secondary teachers. But, as I stressed at the beginning of my remarks, we cannot be everything to everyone even within our own communities, and so we shall have to continue to choose our issues (and our self-presentations) carefully.



“This above all else, thine own selves be true” seems the appropriate slogan. And we need to explain ourselves as honestly and carefully as we can.

I know that most of you share my heart-sickness at the self-aggrandizing and spin-controlling society in which we live. You may or may not agree with me when I say that very few national higher education organizations present and represent the best that our several academic communities have to offer the country, in part because they selfishly pursue their organizational self-interests, and partly because they are too defensive and reactive. If you share my view that we are professors because we have a calling, because we are deeply committed to that which we profess, then I hope you agree with me that clear statement of our commitments is what we ought to ask of the AAUP. That will not be as simple as it sounds, but I hope we can spend some time exploring what it would mean.

Thank you for bearing with me.