What is the Academic Life?
1. General Answers to Essential Questions

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Series Introduction

What is, or should be, the academic life? After many years of thinking about academic ideals to live by, and occasionally writing about academic standards and ethics, the author aims to write a series on the essentials of the academic life. This journal was found to be progressive, welcoming a dialogue on articles of similar scope such as "Some thoughts on the idea of a University" (Sharma, 2012).

The plan of this series is to first set out some essential questions on timeless universals of the academic life, with brief, general answers in this article. Then further articles will aim for more detailed answers and discuss previous scholarship on the idea of the university. In the manner of a spiral, the approach of this series is to answer each question in the most general terms, and then in subsequent articles to discuss the specifics, interconnections, and implications of the issues raised.

Another whole series is envisaged on the academic life in a global age, a sort of report card on reconstituting Academia in cyberspace. It would draw from the author’s experience founding the World Association for Online Education. Nowadays educational technology is auxiliary to all disciplines, which is congenial to the author as a generalist. Since the advent of the Internet, new questions need to be raised, such as: How is scholarship adapting to this global age? How can the worldwide community of scholars contribute to a constructive form of globalization and take more of a leadership role in the world?
Questions Definitive of the Academic Life

What is, or should be, the academic life? It is hypothesized that the following questions are essential, and that fitting answers can point to the universals of the academic life. What is a university? What is a professor? Who are the colleagues of a person in higher education? What should be learned in graduate school regardless of the field of specialization? To what extent can a human being live by academic standards and ethics?

General Answers to the Essential Questions

The wording and combination of these questions can be suggestive of the universals involved in the academic life by distinguishing some definitive issues while eliminating what is not unique and essential to higher education. The selected questions to examine will first be answered briefly and generally to present an overview of the essence of the academic life. The author addressed some of the key issues earlier as follows:

The essence of the university is its universality, as represented by academic standards, ethics, and meaningful subject matter that transcends cultural boundaries ... Liberal arts requirements for all the students unify the university, lest its purpose be narrowed to vocational training in separate departments ... When atomic weapons and other scientific advances posed potential hazards to civilization, those with a well-rounded education pointed out the dire necessity for ethical responsibility, encouraging initiatives such as bioethics and disarmament. (McCarty, 1995, p. 43)

What is a university? - The essence of a university is its universality. All true universities have this quality in common. There can be a universal academic approach to any subject matter. Thus the curriculum can include pure and applied fields, theoretical and practical approaches, education and training, but not solely the latter elements. A true university does not yield to contemporary societal imperatives, otherwise education is sacrificed to vocationalization or whatever trend rules the day.

In one sense a university is a unity in itself, as cited above. General education or liberal arts subjects that round out higher education for all students provide a commonality within the university as well as an interface toward the world. The liberal arts are thus essential to all specializations and provide a practical world-view as well, for example in foreign policy studies (Walt, 2012).

A university is situated in a certain community, era, and culture, but it shares the universality of the academic life in common with other universities in the world. All universities should be inviolable by forces that devalue or corrupt scholarship. An institutional culture where the
university ends at the gates of its campus displays a grave misunderstanding of what a university is. True universities are fit for regional and international academic exchanges. Provided languages are translated, true universities have such commonalities that they are interpermeable and interconnected.

A university should be a sanctuary from the surrounding society with its corrupting influences of nationalism, violence, materialism, utilitarianism, exclusivism, and so forth. The university should provide sanctuary to well-reasoned critical thinking (cf. Hornedo, 2012) and proposed alternatives to the status quo of the society. Faculty members must be free from retaliation for provoking students to think or for publishing any conclusions reached conscientiously by objective analysis.

A university does not yield its objectivity to unquestioned assumptions or prejudices of the truth. Newtonian physics governed everything that could be perceived in the 19th Century, but it had to give way to quantum physics and relativity theory when a greater scale was examined. The academic life was introduced by Socrates through Plato as the relentlessly examined life.

The idea of the university will be examined further in subsequent articles, considering the views of other scholars. The rest of the questions also aim to clarify the universal qualities of the university and academic life.

**What is a professor?** – This question is raised because a professor personifies the university. How to be professorial clarifies the academic life most succinctly. Thus the intent here is not to exclude scholars of a different rank or at an earlier stage of their careers, but rather to encourage scholars and especially teachers to be professorial. By living up to academic ideals, one is pointed toward the role of a professor, and suitable recognition may naturally follow.

To clarify what a professor is in the most direct way, it must be distinguished from surrounding professional roles such as being an instructor training specific skills, or being solely a classroom teacher. Although a professor is partly a teacher, classes are fewer because of the other roles a professor should play in Academia and society. Professors need to be available to profess in areas where their expertise applies. For example, there is the blind review of papers, with little or no recognition for such work. A news program or a court may need the expertise and established credibility of a professor to arrive at an informative perspective or a sound judgement.

The academic process may be corrupted by the purchase of an academic position in some way, or by a careerist, publish-or-perish mentality of academic opportunism, which can be incited by credentialistic hiring practices and rigid rules such as point systems for promotion. Then what is
more difficult, complex, interdisciplinary, or important is not researched, and publications in many fields are clogged with statistics that contribute little to knowledge or society because it is safer to stick to what can be quantified (McCarty, 2008, p. 3).

Of course there must be accountability, but in a context that assumes a love of learning and the priority of discovering things that truly advance academic fields. Often the bar is high for credentials in appointments but low for scholarly accomplishments after promotion.

Professors should have the time and tenure to rise above superficial concerns, to keep up with educational technology and advancements in their fields, to be active in academic societies, to give presentations at conferences, and to engage in all sorts of scholarly communication including but not confined to publications that ‘count.’

Who are the colleagues of a university person? – They are the worldwide community of scholars connected to all true universities. Wherever the universality of the university manifests in shared academic standards and ethics, scholars belong to this worldwide community. Thus, beyond language barriers and cultural differences, they can readily communicate, collaborate or cooperate with other scholars sharing the academic way of life.

Because of the universality of the academic life, a regional or international academic project or association can be specialized, interdisciplinary, or pan-disciplinary when it involves expertise auxiliary to all fields such as educational technology. Thus the question of who is involved in the world community of scholars can provide another perspective on what is essential to the academic life.

While everyone on the staff of one’s institution may also be considered one’s colleagues, educators and researchers imbued with academic standards and ethics have more in common with scholars at other institutions and in other countries than with nearby colleagues not engaged in scholarly activities. As can be seen at international conferences or in international academic organizations, scholars in the same fields have much in common and much to share with colleagues from different cultures but similar disciplines. Scholars from countries or religions that are currently in conflict can maintain collegial relations and cooperate in academic endeavors.

If scholars in some countries or regions cannot thus interact, either they are not true scholars or, more likely, their institution is impoverished, corrupted, or politically oppressed. Cut off from the lifeblood of academic exchanges in a global age, excellence would be unlikely, and such an institution might be a university in name only.
If professors are loaded with classes and campus duties that are not professorial, then scholarly activities and academic exchanges outside of the institution are in effect blocked. On the other hand, professors who hardly teach but are urged to bring in grants represent another distortion of the university by sacrificing its educational mission.

**What should be learned in graduate school regardless of the field of specialization?** – It is the academic way of life, the standards and ethics of the world community of scholars, which should be internalized through intense graduate study and thesis committee supervision. There is a qualitative difference or leap from high school to university, and then again to graduate school. Just as higher education should not be an extension of high school, an advanced degree represents more than an extension of undergraduate studies. There can be exceptions where an individual internalizes the academic life before graduate school, or without it, because most learning is informal or through self-education. But a graduate degree from an accredited university means that such attainment is certified, and the individual is recognized as a peer in the academic community.

Because of the difficulty of surpassing the level of informational knowledge, often an academic person does not emerge without the cauldron of a thesis and the fires of vetting by professors. No amount of memorized information, formulae, citations, classes or conferences attended, or content produced in itself constitutes a qualitative leap into the academic life. But in the process of graduate school it is the mental discipline of standards and ethics that apply to all fields which may turn a person into a scholar.

Supervising professors can catch common errors of unscholarly thinking and suggest rigorous approaches to a certain investigation. The rigor itself is the discipline, and it should inculcate both rationality and ethical conduct. Common ways of thinking among lay people that scholars must overcome include overgeneralization from a few instances, certitude despite incomplete information, seeing and valuing only what is within one’s purview, perceptual errors, logical fallacies, oversimplifying the complexity of interdependent causal factors, and so forth. Ethical errors include plagiarism, improper attribution, purchasing of papers or credentials, altering of inconvenient data or results, exploitation of others for academic advancement, and all other kinds of misrepresentation.

Thus, while difficult to specify, there are academic standards and ethics that are common to all disciplines and recognizable throughout the world community of scholars. It is academic rigor that is internalized through the discipline of a graduate education. What is to be acquired is not informational knowledge but rather expertise in an academic field.
To what extent can a human being live by academic standards and ethics? - In a holistic view of the human being, there are natural feelings such as love that motivate educators to share. Yet although there are phenomena seemingly beyond the grasp of scholarly methods, one could ask what affective or metaphysical domains exist where academic standards and ethics would prove unhelpful or contradicted.

It could take a lifetime to explore the great extent to which a scholar can live by academic standards and ethics. The scholar never wishes to stop learning, enquiring, experimenting, teaching, researching, publishing, mentoring, openly sharing and communicating. Academic methods are applicable to daily life, and academic ethics are applicable to moral conduct. The rigor of the academic life stays with the scholar after hours, an examined life of reason that applies to daily life in cognitive, and in some ways, affective domains.

When the idea of the university lives within a person, the academic life can provide plenty to live by personally as well as professionally, without contradiction. Such is the universality of the university.

References


What is the Academic Life?
2. The Idea of the University

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**Introduction**

The first article in this series ventured general answers to questions definitive of the academic life. This article spirals back to the first question about the nature of the academic life, what a university is or should be. But universities today are under siege, threatening to compromise the ideals that scholars have upheld for generations if not millennia. Recently the direction of universities is constantly being contested, so only some representative arguments can be presented here. This article will also turn to other authors to characterize the classical idea of the university that is always worth reconsidering.

**The Mission of Universities Contested**

It will be seen that the article by R.P. Sharma in the inaugural issue of this journal reflects similar struggles East and West to defend the original idea of the university from unscholarly societal pressures:

> To what extent and measure can we allow the cosmos of knowledge to be inhabited by positive sciences and technologies only costing a pervasive impact on the lifestyle, attitude and values... eclipsing the very survival of humanity based disciplines? The pitch is queered by the market forces which call all the shots. Social sciences, with the exception of economics have to adorn the mantle of sciences to acquire respectability, with an articulate disdain for disciplines which raise questions of the first order, such as philosophy which has and in its essence still can, mother natural sciences. Aristotle has upstaged Plato and Socrates. (Sharma, 2012)

The first article (McCarty, 2012) expressed quite similar concerns. Academia and particularly the humanities are threatened from without by market forces and in a way from within by positivism, reductionism, a quantitative turn in both studies and evaluation, ethical relativism, business models, and vocationalization of higher education.

> Positive (or positivist) analysis or theories ... only attempt to describe how things 'are', as opposed to how they 'should' be.
Positive means also 'value free'. In this sense, the opposite of positive is normative … Positive statements are also often referred to as descriptive statements. (Wikipedia, 2012c)

One can accept descriptive studies without placing normative values off limits. While Aristotle narrowed the intuitive scope of Plato, his teacher, to a more empirical approach, Aristotle was an ethicist as well as a scientist (MIT, 1994). Academic ethics must also be unapologetically normative, though scholars of goodwill can disagree on some gray areas.

Higher education [in the U.S.] faces stark challenges: the ravaging of public universities’ budgets by strained state and local governments; ever rising tuition and student debt; inadequate student achievement; the corrosive impact of soaring inequality; and the neglect by some elite institutions of their core mission of teaching undergraduates.

[John] Dewey had a different vision [of] what education is primarily for: the cultivation of freedom within society. We should not think of schools as garrisons protecting us from enemies, nor as industries generating human capital. Rather, higher education’s highest purpose is to give all citizens the opportunity to find ‘large and human significance’ in their lives and work. (Roth, 2012)

The purposes and goals of universities have been expressed in many ways by educationalists of every era, yet the universality of the university shines through them all. Dewey is echoed from India in terms of humanistic psychology:

Useful learning is that which pervades the whole person and which is relevant to one’s personal style, needs, and human development. Teachers have the major responsibility of helping students to become more fully developed human beings. (Kasinath, 2012, p. 94)

Humanists … contend that it is far more important for the student to learn how to find new knowledge and to cope with a changing world than merely to absorb the information of yesterday and today. Here the focus is on creating the kind of emotional and intellectual climate in which the student can grow intellectually and affectively. (Kasinath, 2012, p. 95)

But there are also many ways to undermine the distinct mission of universities where they interface with a contemporary society and are thus vulnerable, for instance, through the need for funding in an economic system. However, it is on a level of ideology beyond necessity where the mission of universities can be legitimately contested. Somehow the stakes have grown higher, perhaps as opportunities diminish for many just as their
expectations are raised by higher education. Market forces leave many educated people feeling exploited or excluded. As the rich press their advantage, the mainstream mass media outlets seem to side with their fellow elite class, leaving especially struggling young educated people with a sense of betrayal.

[Among] institutions that are intended to safeguard against this ease of inducing blind trust in and obedience to authorities[, the] most obvious one is journalism, which, at its best, serves as a check against political authority by subjecting its pronouncements to skepticism and scrutiny. [Another] is academia, a realm where tenure is supposed to ensure that authority's most sacred orthodoxies are subjected to unrelenting, irreverent questioning. (Greenwald, 2012)

The above American lawyer seems to imply that academics are also following the path of least resistance and selling out to authoritarian power in their society. While it may be true of faculty members who are not really committed to the academic way of life, tenure itself is one of the pillars of Academia being undermined by market forces and administrative business models. Part-time teachers have increasingly replaced professors and are among the ranks of the working poor. One embittered American part-timer, an anonymous whistle-blower, makes a cogent argument in the following passages:

[In the 1960s] universities were the very heart of intense public discourse, passionate learning, and vocal citizen involvement in the issues of the times. It was during this time, too, when colleges had a thriving professoriate, and when students were given access to a variety of subject areas, and the possibility of broad learning. The Liberal Arts stood at the center of a college education, and students were exposed to philosophy, anthropology, literature, history, sociology, world religions, foreign languages and cultures.

From the 1970s until today, as the number of full-time faculty jobs continued to shrink, the number of full-time administrative jobs began to explode. As [the] faculty was deprofessionalized and casualized, reduced to teaching as migrant contract workers, administrative jobs now offered good, solid salaries, benefits, offices, prestige and power. In 2012, administrators now outnumber faculty on every campus across the country.

[T]hey have not saved money by hiring adjuncts – they have reduced faculty salaries, security and power. The money wasn’t saved, because
it was simply re-allocated to administrative salaries, coach salaries and outrageous university president salaries. There has been a redistribution of funds away from those who actually teach, the scholars – and therefore away from the students’ education itself – and into these administrative and executive salaries, sports costs – and the expanded use of ‘consultants’, PR and marketing firms, [and] law firms.

Academia once celebrated itself as an independent institution. Academia is a culture, one that offers a long-standing worldview which values on-going, rigorous intellectual, emotional, psychological, creative development of the individual citizen. It respects and values the contributions of the scholar, the intellectual, to society. It treasures the promise of each student, and strives to offer the fullest possible support to the development of that promise. It does this not only for the good of the scholar and the student, but for the social good. Like medicine, academia existed for the social good. Neither should be a purely for-profit endeavor. *(The Homeless Adjunct, 2012)*

Such an exposé in an anonymous blog post by a downtrodden academic is not ordinarily publishable, but it basically rings true. The search for truth has to go wherever the facts lead, however uncomfortable to established parties, not merely shining light where the terrain is already bright. Many scholars have expressed similar concerns about bloated administrations that may sacrifice educational excellence by hiring adjuncts and using PhD candidates to teach or interface with undergraduates. “The PhD used to be about offering a unique research contribution to the field; now it's about paying tuition and being exploited as a TA” *[Teaching Assistant]* *(Downes, 2012)*.

In Japan some similar trends have been observed, with most foreign full-time teachers on one to three year contracts, often not renewable, and the percentage of classes taught by part-time teachers or even outsourced is growing. Many Japanese as well as foreign lecturers are evidently struggling amid shrinking budgets and institutional inequities. At some point the quality of education also begins to suffer, and various stakeholders including the general public increasingly lose sight of the *raison d'être* of higher education.
Thus it behooves each generation to reexamine the classical idea of the university and see why it has stood the test of time. If academic ideals had been discarded every time they proved inconvenient for social acceptance or career advancement, then today the qualitative difference between academic degrees, or between education and training, would be indistinct. Instead, in every generation, mostly unsung heroes have upheld the academic standards and ethics that make the university universal.

The Origin of Universities

Universities trace back at least to Plato’s Akademia, founded about 2,400 years ago. Less well known in the world is Nālandā, the “greatest center of Buddhist scholarship in medieval India” (Harris, 2000, p. 918), founded over 1,500 years ago:

Nalanda was one of the world’s first residential universities ... it accommodated over 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers. The university was considered an architectural masterpiece, and was marked by a lofty wall and one gate. Nalanda had eight separate compounds and ten temples, along with many other meditation halls and classrooms ... The subjects taught at Nalanda University covered every field of learning, and it attracted pupils and scholars from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia and Turkey. (Wikipedia, 2012b)

What made Nālandā a university was that it “covered every field of learning” then known. Starting around the same time, Benedictine “monastic schools were designed for the religious training and general education of students” (Turner, 2000, p. 1131), a tradition that continued through, for example, “the foundation in the mid-17th century of the University of Salzburg” (Turner, 2000, p. 1131) in Austria.

The word university is derived from the Latin universitas magistrorum et scholarium, roughly meaning ‘community of teachers and scholars’. The term was coined by the Italian University of Bologna, which, with a traditional founding date of 1088, is considered the first university. The origin of many medieval universities can be traced to the Christian cathedral schools or monastic schools which appear as early as the 6th century and were run for hundreds of years as such before their formal establishment as university... (Wikipedia, 2012a)

From the above examples it can be seen that the development of universities historically has been inextricable from religious aspirations.
The Idea of the University

Thus in the 19th Century Cardinal John Henry Newman could conceive of the university as a place of 'universal knowledge', in which specialized training, though valid in itself, was subordinate to the pursuit of a broader liberal education. These ideals, later developed by other Victorian apostles of culture like Matthew Arnold, became the basis of a characteristic British belief that education should aim at producing generalists rather than narrow specialists, and that non-vocational subjects - in arts or pure science - could train the mind in ways applicable to a wide range of jobs. (Anderson, 2010)

These are points that seem to have stood the test of time. The phrase 'idea of the university' was not invented by Newman, but goes back to a seminal period in modern university history, the reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt in Prussia. Starting with the University of Berlin, founded in 1810, the 'Humboldtian' university became a model for the rest of Europe, and by 1914 German universities were generally admired as the best in the world. It was the Humboldtian model that shaped the research universities of the United States, which head the international league today. The Humboldtian university can be seen as the characteristic form of the university idea until the growth of mass higher education in the late twentieth century. It had a number of interlocking features, some new, some inherited from the past, and was inevitably marked by the deep forces of the age, including nationalism, secularization, the growth of the modern state, and the shift of social power from aristocracies to the middle classes, on the basis of merit, intellectual expertise, and professionalism.

The central Humboldtian principle was the 'union of teaching and research' in the work of the individual scholar or scientist. The function of the university was to advance knowledge by original and critical investigation, not just to transmit the legacy of the past or to teach skills. Teaching should be based on the disinterested search for truth, and students should participate, at however humble a level, in this search. Hence the classic view that the university was a 'community of scholars and students' engaged on a common task. Humboldt's influence is still felt in the assertion that research must be an integral part of every university's activities. (Anderson, 2010)

Harking back to the Socratic method, Karl Jaspers also represented the classical view of the university, with a focus on the process of education (the pronouns "his" and "himself" presumably refer to women as well):
The university does not have a mere teaching function; the student must also ‘learn from his professors to engage in personal research and therefore acquire a scientific mode of thought which will colour his whole existence’… Communication with the researcher and participation in the research process can stimulate a scientific attitude in the student himself which Jaspers characterizes as ‘objectivity, a devotion to the subject, reasoned balance, investigation of contrasting possibilities, self-criticism’… It is ‘education in reason’… (Horn, 1993, pp. 7-8)

Without agreeing with such authors in every respect, amid the complexity of changing times, these passages can still serve as a beacon of ideals to shed light on the idea of the university in the contested arena of education today. For example, there are ample reasons to maintain university autonomy and academic freedom (Anderson, 2010). While the particulars of studies change, a look at the heritage of Academia can inoculate readers against the conceit that the latest trends in society are the greatest ever for education. To eclipse these academic ideals would mean uprooting the universality that serves as a North Star guiding the direction of academic enquiry.

Since their earliest days universities have been international institutions. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they did not escape the powerful force of nationalism, and politicians looked to them to shape national identity and serve national interests. Yet the cosmopolitanism of science and learning survived. This would not have happened if the model did not possess some inner vitality.

Individual scholars and scientists should be free to pursue the truth, and to teach and publish their findings; objective science, following rigorous intellectual criteria and subject to what is today called 'peer review', would immunize universities from religious or political interference. The professionalization of science and scholarship, and the organization of knowledge through specialized disciplines, created internationally accepted standards and gave scientists and scholars wider loyalties. In democracies, academic freedom came to include the right of academics to be active citizens, and to pronounce on political questions, making universities the home of public intellectuals, and a creative and independent cultural force. (Anderson, 2010)
Conclusion
In order to understand the academic life, the initial question examined in the first article was, what is a university? This article has provided more specifics and historical depth. The academic standards and ethics constitutive of the academic life, but contested in societies today, are reflected in the heritage of universities, demonstrably worth preserving. While scholars aim for objectivity, and academic standards are scientific, constantly tested, and hence generally agreed upon worldwide, it is in ethical issues where controversy tends to arise. If academic ethics can encompass the kinds of realizable ideals or best practices alluded to above, then the way is clear to define the mission of the university in terms of upholding universal standards and academic ethics.

References


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What is the Academic Life?

3. Upholding Professional Standards and Ethics

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Introduction

Previous articles in this series ventured general answers concerning the nature of the academic life, the time-honored but contested mission of universities, and the interconnected world community of scholars (McCarty, 2012a; 2012b). To review those articles before this conclusion, see http://www.waoe.org/steve/academic_life_1.html

This article will apply the previous principles to further clarify the nature of education and the exemplary life of the educator. Ethics will be distinguished from values and morals, with professional ethics added to academic ethics. The role of educators in society is suggested, with examples given of how professional ethics are upheld or violated. In order to clarify standards and to uphold ethics in the real world of experience, it is necessary to challenge unethical practices, because there is quite a difference in outcomes in each individual and society depending on whether educators live the academic life or not.

The role of Educators in forming Cultural Identity

Parents start to impart humanness to infants, but then education becomes a strong force of *enculturation*, steering students onto a certain track in a society. To illustrate the process of enculturation, pre-school children in Japan, wearing the same uniforms, their back pushed if necessary to bow before a shrine, start to *become Japanese*. With every act of communication in their ethnic group, their membership in a culture deepens. A culture is a distinct set of implicit expectations to behave, think, and communicate in certain ways cumulative of the history of the group.

If the social environment changes and a person encounters a different language and culture, an *acculturation* process of accommodation to the other
culture can be observed. When the individual’s first culture is well established through education, the process of becoming bilingual, and bicultural if desired, or multilingual and multicultural, can be entirely additive, with cognitive benefits. Regardless of the outcome in terms of career or enlightenment, there was a certain prior education, and each educator in the process held a great responsibility for the future of each child.

Provided educators are treated with due respect by decision-makers in schools and governments, then educators can serve not as nine-to-five workers but exemplars of cultural identity and the educated life. In higher education, where foreign teachers widen the scope of learning, a collegial faculty can represent multilingualism, multiculturalism, and peace where reconciliation between cultures currently in conflict is sorely needed. Thus educators are stewards of cultural identity and bridges for enquiring minds to a more global outlook.

**Education as a Meta-Profession**

Having seen how education and the living example of educators influence the cognitive development of young people, education continually influences the shape of society for adults as well. Majors in higher education, vocational school courses, continuing education, or self-study with educational materials largely determine the kinds of professions that exist, and influence their professional ethos. That is, a kind of education took place prior to each formal manifestation of the professions in a society. Moreover, what is learned in liberal arts or general education can apply to many if not all professions. Thus the educator is a meta-professional whose responsibility extends to the occupations that exist in society, the quality of work performed, and the level of professional ethics generally upheld.

**The Professoriate as Stewards of the Professions**

Focusing on professors and the worldwide community of scholars sharing academic standards and ethics, higher education is a meta-profession in various ways. American academics use the term meta-professional to describe the roles and skills expected of a professor besides the content area knowledge that they teach, particularly “scholarly or creative activities
(including research), service to the institution and community, and administration” (Theall & Arreola, n.d.). The Kardia Group details the typical contemporary American faculty career trajectory, stating that “[f]aculty careers are considered to be a meta-profession: a complex collection of responsibilities, skills, and demands for which there can be no uniform training or preparation” (n.d.). While that is true as far as it goes, the formulation has been criticized as applying almost equally well to other professions. Gemma (2011) points to IT as an example of a meta-professional skill that is needed now by nearly all professions. The term “meta-professional” and the phrase “stewards of the professions” have also been used too narrowly to aggrandize a certain discipline such as management or some aspect of health care.

The above sources seem to completely miss the meaning of education as a meta-profession suggested here. Education is the ultimate meta-profession that sets the standards and ethics for the occupations that constitute each society, and as a global scholarly community, thus guides the world. Higher education particularly shapes and upholds the standards and ethics of professional occupations. It stands above other professions in providing their education, guiding principles, methodology, and ethical responsibilities.

That is, in real life the professions tend to function autonomously and do not necessarily respond ethically to issues outside of their technical expertise. For example, expediency may prevail regardless of the environmental impact. Across professions, doctors do not instruct lawyers or economists to follow the Hippocratic oath to do no harm. Doctors themselves may be corrupted by the profit motive to perform unnecessary tests or to cover up their mistakes, as nurses well know. The military is actually a profession that maintains standards well at most levels, but it relies on obedience, so it must be pointed in the right direction by global ethics. Only the professoriate plays a role in society that can plausibly uphold professional standards and ethics across different fields. This makes it crucial for professors to exemplify the highest academic standards possible in their own conduct.

Values, Morals, and Professional Ethics

While the professoriate is best placed to guide society on global issues with reason, the proper scope of interventions in professional ethics needs
to be clarified. Educators can speak out when other occupations go astray ethically, or when everyday practices are harmful and could be improved. Values may be part of an inviolable culture or interpretation of a religion, what is considered good or bad, to be embraced or avoided, and what is more or less important when it comes to priorities. Individuals may also refine their own values. Yet there are customs in certain cultures that are harmful, for example to women’s health. Their values reflect good intentions, so it is the practices, how they impart their values, that may need to be questioned, or education in alternative ways to accomplish the same goals may be offered.

There is some overlap among values, morals, and ethics, but morals tend to be widely accepted socially, and based in belief systems or ideologies. Morals are often codified in proverbs or narratives, where the conclusion is sometimes explicitly framed in English as ‘the moral of the story.’ Morals, however, tend to result in strong judgments that others are good people or immoral. To moralize would tend to just pit one cultural value system against another. Effective interventions would be constructive and probably indirect. For one thing, morals of individuals suffer under socio-economic duress, so the root causes may be treated, such as the lack of human dignity. The scope of peace-making may be limited where morals differ, except for educators to appeal to underlying common values and good intentions.

The concern of academics is more toward professional ethics, where being unethical is unprofessional (cf. Changing Minds, n.d.) and vice versa. Professional morals or values are not the issue but rather the ethos of a profession in the normative sense. Ethos or mores refer descriptively to the prevailing values practiced in a certain time and place. Academic standards and ethics apply particularly to professional ethics. For example, academic honesty versus dishonesty, where falsified research can be dangerous or misleading, can be readily applied to other professions.

Standards, as distinct from ethics, in an academic sense are scientific or mathematical signposts, statistical measurements or accepted practices to ensure quality, academic honesty, methodological reliability, and objectivity. To avoid subjectivity or emotionally laden value judgments, the quantitative paradoxically becomes qualitative as standards quantify quality. Conversely, to fall short of standards is considered poor quality, and to deliberately violate the standards of a discipline is considered unethical.
Upholding Professional Standards and Ethics

Thus far, this article has pointed out the great responsibility of educators in shaping the ethos of each society and the world, as each individual is educated either fairly or unjustly. Educators belong to a meta-profession that stewards the standards and ethics of professions that might otherwise devolve into self-serving occupations insulated from global ethical issues. While the scope of educator activism has limits, nowhere is critical thinking more justified than in academic professions and within educators themselves.

Previous articles in this series suggested that academic standards and ethics provide ample guidance for the educator to live by. That is, educators ought to play an active role upholding professional ethics in their society, but this mission would be undermined if they did not live it themselves. That is what the title of this series, the academic life, ultimately means. Not to privilege the professoriate, but professors are uniquely placed in society to publicly and credibly uphold professional standards and ethics, and, provided they have academic freedom, to speak truth to power. The responsibility to positively influence society has been entrusted to scholars through the centuries, represented by the idea of the university.

Unfortunately it is all too easy to make an endless list of betrayals of the academic mission, though it may sound judgmental to venture into specific examples. There are general problems such as economic and political pressures from society pushing universities toward vocationalization. University administrations and staff have swelled (Berrett, 2011) while part-timers teach more and more of the classes that students and families are hard-pressed to afford. Besides general problems there are institutional issues that go against Academia as a meritocracy, such as factionalism, nepotism, bribery, cronyism or favoritism. There should not be one set of rules for rank and file teachers, while insiders can abrogate the rules with impunity.

Universities lack universality either when their activities do not extend beyond their gates, or when opportunism and careerism determine what faculty members research and publish. When teachers find romance in the student body, even if they marry a former student, what began as an unequal power relationship was in effect exploited, and the non-physical social contract
of trust in a credentialed authority figure was betrayed. Since the academic life does not end when the bell rings, the examples here simply apply academic standards and ethics to the conduct of professional educators.

In Japanese, ‘salaryman professor’ is a derisive expression understood by the general public. Whether male or female, there are expectations of academic and voluntary activities that distinguish a professor from a lower paid teacher. This also applies to side jobs, taking advantage of a lighter teaching load to supplement one’s income. Or when academic activities are actively pursued only until entering the desired position or promotion to full professor, that is not the academic life.

A similar notion in Japanese is the ‘salary thief,’ a sort of “free rider” (Hardin, 2003) who does the minimum necessary. For accreditation reviews or university rankings, the aggregate of faculty academic accomplishments is measured. The professor with seniority or connections may have little incentive beyond social activities on campus. Of course to cut corners, to vanity publish, to use graduate students and take credit for their work, to list an author who did not write part of a publication, to list authors in order of rank rather than the amount contributed, or any other misrepresentation would be unethical.

Nowadays many Westerners can get advanced degrees insofar as their socio-economic background affords, but if their research day or free time is spent on hobbies and so forth, perhaps their character was not really suited for Academia. Professors are given time for self-motivated initiatives, research, mentoring, community involvement, and so forth, not so that they can moonlight, go bicycling or water their lawn before dusk. Colleagues ought to be collegial, not to gossip or withhold cooperation out of professional jealousy. Professors should be professorial and able to profess.

Educators are vulnerable to exploitation through excessive campus duties, classes at branch schools, or student recruitment activities. Such economically motivated duties are not justified insofar as they block scholarly activities and academic exchanges outside of the institution. Administrators from a high school background or who did not deeply internalize graduate education may overlook academic activities. Junior or community colleges may excuse faculty from research but assign them many classes, in some cases calling all teachers instructors, democratically
equating them with driving school trainers, and then paying them accordingly.

A more positive notion seen in Japan is that of ‘Ph.D. or equivalent (accomplishments).’ While a degree is finished or terminal, graduate school is preparation for a career applying and building upon that concentrated study. A credential received years or decades ago is not an entitlement to a living without academic accomplishments having continually grown. An academic with a Master’s degree could be on a doctoral dissertation committee at a major university because of expertise in the area of the thesis. Peer-reviewed publications or reviewing such manuscripts, along with other such demonstrations of expertise can be taken as equivalent to terminal degree training. Some institutions are merely swayed by impressive titles or credentialism, but the notion of ‘Ph.D. or equivalent’ is closer to proven scholarship. Also the notion of a specialization ‘or related field’ takes into account the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary scholarship, where a related ‘cluster of specializations’ can be more comprehensive. Narrow-mindedness is the antithesis of the academic life.

In conclusion, the question is what each person in the world community of scholars can do to uphold academic and professional ethics, to improve society while conducting an honest search for truth in their own lives. By working hard and upholding professional ethics, the educator or professor merits recognition for being responsive to the needs of society and the world. If that sounds idealistic, so be it. Academia is or should be a meritocracy, so those who live the academic life should become leaders in some ways in their institutions, exemplars of professional standards and ethics to their societies, and, with global networking, guiding lights to the world.
References


