

What is a College?



An academic institution is like a three-legged stool. It cannot stand upright unless all three legs are functioning equally well. If one leg is missing or out of proportion, the stool falls.

The three legs of the academic stool are the Teachers (Professors), the Students, and the Administrative Staff. All of these legs are necessary for the academic institution to function properly.

Leg 1

The Teachers or Professors must be well versed in their subject, and capable of imparting this wisdom to others. If either their knowledge or their communicative ability is deficient, they cannot carry out their responsibilities thus their leg of the academic stool is broken or out of shape.

Recently there have been discussions on whether the content of knowledge or the method of imparting this knowledge to others is more important. Common sense would tell one that both are important. A teacher that lacks knowledge or lacks the ability to communicate this knowledge is incompetent.

Leg 2

Students must be willing to learn and devote the necessary work required to master their studies. They will be judged on how well they have mastered these studies. This degree of mastery is usually reflected by a letter grade.

Over the last few decades it has become fashionable to primarily attribute a student's success in mastering a subject to the quality of instruction. If a student doesn't learn, it is assumed that the instructor or the institution is at fault. Thus, there has been a marked tendency for instructors and institutions to inflate the grade that a student will receive in order to promote the impression of quality. Whereas a letter grade of "C" was considered normal and average in the past, now the average grade in every community college and most colleges and universities is "B".

Furthermore, the students and their parents tend to think that any grade lower than "B" is a failure. They tend to blame this failure as a failure of the teachers and of the institution. Rarely do they reflect that a student might be unable to get a better grade because of lack of native ability, poor previous preparatory experience, poor family support, lack of motivation, or just plain indolence.

If I, as a teacher, turned in to the registrar a final grade report containing mostly "B" and "A" grades, I would be considered by everybody to be a "good" teacher. If I turned in a final grade report filled with "C" and "F" grades, I would be terminated.

There is a term for the above phenomenon. It is called "Grade Inflation." It is rife throughout our educational system.

Other factors contributing to grade inflation include 1) rewording student effort over academic success, 2) considering college as a business rather than a learning environment, 3) valuing the getting a "degree" over getting knowledge, and 4) emphasizing a student's "well-being" over academic success.

Related to grade inflation is a reduction in the number of courses and the degree of research experience a student must have to earn an advanced degree.

Fifty years ago it was common to take six to eight years for a doctoral student to complete a Doctor of Philosophy Degree. These new doctorates were then expected to be at the pinnacle of their chosen field.

Today, a doctoral student graduates, on the average, in two to three years. It is commonly expected that this newly minted Ph.D. would get a Post-Doc with an expert in the chosen field, and "learn the trade." This abbreviated study to earn a Ph.D. is encouraged by university administrators. This enables them to hire "Post-Docs" to do the chores for less money and without the problems of tenure or "perks."

This also shows up when you look at the number of authors on a published piece of scholarly research. An author list of three to seven people on a research paper is common. The authors include the Major Professor, the Post-Docs, and even some of the laboratory helpers. Individual research is discouraged. I am reminded of the story about the camel being constructed by a committee designing a horse.

Scholarship by individuals is increasingly published in the form of a "Review" of the literature.

Leg 3

Administrators are the people who support the work done by the professors and by the students. Among the administrators are the college president, various deans, secretarial staff, accountants, public relations people, janitorial staff, and building maintenance people.

Their job is to provide an environment where the teachers and students can do their respective jobs. It should not be their job to tell the teachers what or how to teach! Presumably the teachers are hired to do a certain type of teaching. They should be hired accordingly, and then left alone to do their jobs. Administrators should be facilitators and not dictators.

Fifty plus years ago, an academic professor was hired to do a three-fold job. Number one was teaching, number two was doing research, and number three was to provide service to the community. With increasing availability of Federal monies in the form of research grants, these priorities have changed.

In general about 50% of all grant monies are allocated directly to the universities and college as overhead to reimburse them for supplying the scholars with offices, laboratories, materials, and hired help. This has changed over time such that overhead monies are used to pay professor's salaries. This puts the predicament of scholars having to acquire grant monies just to pay themselves and their administrators a salary.

Many administrators tend to worry more about building a monument to themselves, increasing their personal wealth, and "being in charge." Maintaining a good rapport with financial sources and being a good leader is difficult work. I have worked in excellent university teaching and research

environments. I have also worked in what I consider to be similar to a penal colony. I prefer the former.

What is a college? Once I thought I knew

A family member working for the Federal Government devotes about 40 hours per week doing her job, and another 20 hours per week writing grant proposals necessary to keep herself and 3 other hired employees employed.

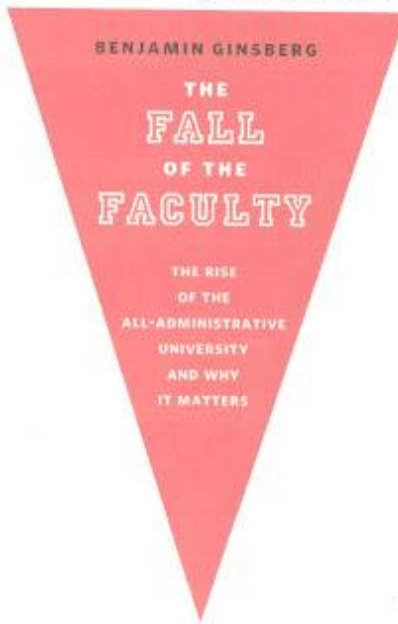
A few years ago I asked for some research space at a State Institution. I was told that I would need a grant to use any of their space. I informed the institution that if I had a grant, I wouldn't need their space. Five years later that space and more is still vacant and unused.

Our local Community College recently completed a fairly large building program. They built three separate buildings approximately 15 miles apart. The southern building isn't used, and I have heard that it is up for sale. The northern building is used, but the scientific laboratory facilities are substandard and are a definite health hazard. The middle building is very spacious and nice. It makes a glowing monument.

PostLude:

Finally let me recommend an excellent article by Dr. Benjamin Ginsberg. This article is excerpted in the August 2011 "The Scientist."

<http://the-scientist.com/2011/08/11/faculty-fallout>



I received my doctorate from the University of Minnesota in 1965. I have lived through much of what Dr. Ginsberg talks about in his book. He is "Right On." [Fred Duerr, Ph.D.](#)