284. A Blithe Spirit

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On the one hand, universities should seek talent wherever it exists and without concern for credentials or professional values. On the other hand, the academic milieu is strange and difficult, and those brought into universities who have had little experience of it might well dislike it, and that could harm it. These two hands matter when a university proposes to indigenize itself.

Credentialism and professionalism are anti-academic attitudes. Academics are scholars, researchers and intellectuals whose work they want judged only according to its merits. They do not think that academic work gains in value because of the credentials of the worker. They certainly do not think a worker's lack of credentials infirms his or her work. They want to hear sound criticisms of their work and they don't care whether the critic possesses credentials or not. They want their work to be used and they don't care by whom.

The point of displaying one's credentials has to be simply that doing so lets people who are looking for a service know that one is competent to supply it. People looking for the service often don't have the time, energy or interest to evaluate the abilities of prospective servers. Certificates, titles, licensing boards, and professional associations can be a great help to us in finding people competent perform the services we seek.

Academics are not supplying a service. Their task is to attempt to understand, interpret and appreciate things and to help others (students, primarily) do the same. Those who wish to study under an academic or to collaborate with one are perfectly competent to evaluate directly their prospective teachers, colleagues or partners. They can read what the academic has written or go talk to him. They had better have the energy and interest to do so, or they themselves cannot be said to be true academics, interested in understanding the world for themselves.

Universities have a long and proud tradition of recruiting into their ranks intellectuals who did not follow standard degree-paths. They sometimes will hire a former premier or a former ambassador who might have only a Masters, and who never entered a doctoral program, to teach a seminar in a political science or history department. Lawyers, colonels and generals, writers and artists, businesspeople, journalists, technicians, and physicians: universities now and then bring people who lack academic credentials into the ranks of the professoriate and have done well to do so. (Some of the best professors I had in the 1970s were plucked from British graduate programs and never completed their terminal degree.)

I'm speaking ideally, of course, when I say that we academics don't care about credentials. Academics find homes in universities and universities, being institutions, need order and standards that can be applied independently of the tastes and commitments of those applying them. Nonetheless, it's too bad that those in higher education have now begun caring more than they

used to about credentials. The number of papers a candidate has published and the quality of the journals in which they've published them, the schools from which they've graduated, the stature of the referees who've written on their behalf…. None of that should matter.

One recent dispiriting case of misplaced concern for credentials occurred at Harvard's John A. Paulson School of Engineering & Applied Sciences. Kit Parker, a bioengineering and applied physics professor, was to teach a course on a policing technique, but his dean cancelled it. Among the complaints was that Dr Parker is not an accredited social scientist.

Credentialism and professionalism are growing threats to the university, except in one area: indigenization. Indigenization initiatives often downplay credentials—or, at least, propose that non-academic credentials are equal to academic ones.

With the rush to indigenize the university, some tenure track positions on offer these days do not require candidates to have a terminal degree. Mount Allison University, in New Brunswick, is seeking to hire a scholar in the field of Mi'kmaw culture. "Candidates who have undertaken an Indigenous path to education as well as those who have pursued a path through academia will be considered for the position," reads the job ad. If the hiring committee is concerned with research and teaching ability, its members can look to writing samples, academic presentations and mock teaching sessions to evaluate the candidates' abilities directly, and that's fine.

Unfortunately, though, positions conceived as indigenization efforts often seem to be as much about advocacy and community relations as about scholarship and academic teaching. The Mount Allison position is reserved for indigenous scholars, requires "commitment to Mi'kmaw culture," and expects close ties to the Mi'kmaw people. Scholars are to be committed to their areas of research, not the objects of their research. (A commitment to gaming culture? To prison culture?)

The standard academic pathway leading to a terminal graduate degree must, for most people, be the best pathway to take if one wants to acquire the knowledge and skills of a scholar and an academic teacher. In principle, though, a person can develop into an excellent scholar through having taken any number of paths. (As well, we should note, when the professors are bad, the curriculum boring and the hoop-jumping pointless, the standard path can kill knowledge and skills.) Universities should not pass talent by just because it doesn't come with a preferred credential.

One important effect of taking the standard pathway is that it inspires a scholar to love academic values. Or, at least, it socializes potential scholars into the ways of academia. Neither academic values nor the ways of the academy come to people easily or naturally. A good university has a culture of disputation. University people are critical of the ideas and work of others. They value intellectual independence and autonomy.

If you ask someone why they've wandered off the standard pathway and they tell you that the professors they had were idiots, the courses they took were boring, or they couldn't stomach the thought of jumping through yet another hoop, you cannot conclude that the life of the mind isn't for them. If, though, they tell you that it was all talk and no action, that they were frustrated that they could never establish any stable conclusions, that they were hearing things that offended or

upset them, or that it was hard to find people who just wanted to sit and share stories, then you have to conclude that they weren't meant for university in the first place.

A serious danger, then, in welcoming into the professoriate people who have taken educational pathways unallied to universities is that they won't like the academy. Not liking it, they will be frustrated by it and, often, will either leave or try to change it. If administrators and faculty members really want to retain the unhappy professor (because the professor is indigenous, for instance, and diversity or reconciliation are institutional idols), then they might themselves work to alter the ethos of their institutions.

When intellectually inclined people get together, nine out of ten times they form something like a church. They establish a doctrine and a set of rituals. They shield their core truths from criticism and insist on brotherhood in the faith. Armed with the faith, they go out into the world to do good work. Only one out of ten times, perhaps despite themselves and without really knowing what they are doing, they form something like a university. In the majority of cases, human psychology prizes belonging above understanding.

Universities are always in danger of becoming churchlike. Current tendencies at within higher education toward doctrine and its enforcement and application predate indigenization initiatives by at least two or three decades. But a blithe willingness when hiring new faculty members to downgrade experience of academic settings could well accelerate the current slide away from scholarship and dispassionate research and toward advocacy and fellowship in the faith.

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