


The 21st-Century Academic

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When I was 19 and decided I wanted to become a psychology professor, I did so from the comfort of my dorm room, on the window seat across from a decommissioned fireplace. I'd always loved reading, writing, and talking, so what better career for me than academe? I could not have known that my vision of faculty life would become anachronistic by the time I was out of graduate school.

I am one of an increasingly small group of Ph.D.s whose faculty dreams have been realized. I have a tenure-track job with paid sabbaticals and institutional support for my research. I've written a book. But with each passing year, my experiences as a faculty member are less and less the norm. What it means to be a professor has changed for many other Ph.D.s — largely because academic life and culture is nothing like it used to be.

Indeed, one in four undergraduates and one in three graduate students are enrolled in at least one online course. Potential students can now apply to college, be accepted, and begin classes within two weeks. Online schooling has increased educational access and opportunity and, in doing so, made college an option not only for more people, but also for more types of people.

Higher education has therefore seen a surge in the number and diversity of applicants. Colleges once tended to enroll 18- to 22-year-olds from middle- and upper-income families but now serve a more diverse population. Since 2000 the number of low-income students enrolled in college has increased 15 percent, the number of female, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American/Alaskan Native students has each increased 29 percent, the number of black students is up 73 percent, and the number of Hispanic students, 126 percent. In 2015, 41 percent of college students were 25 or older.

Such shifts in student demographics have had at least one clear result: They've changed the professoriate — why we teach, what we teach, how we teach, and where we teach.

Why we teach. Maybe at one time, most students went to college to broaden their intellectual horizons and figure themselves out. That time has passed. Today more students attend college for a specific reason: professional advancement.

Especially for adult learners, getting a degree is a means to a promotion, a raise, or entree into a new field. Vocational motivations for degree attainment are driven in part by projected job growth in industries like technology and health care, where there's a need to solve 21st-century problems. Colleges are no longer singularly committed to knowledge production for the sake of it. Academe has shifted toward helping learners use knowledge in new ways — toward innovation.

But there's a disconnect. As professors, we sometimes struggle with teaching for purposes other than cultivating a "life of the mind." In my own liberal-arts education, and at the liberal-arts college where I teach, we are supposed to value learning for learning's sake, not for a job. Yet the reality is that I spend more and more of my time each year discussing how course content is applicable in the "real world," and helping panicked seniors translate their independently designed majors into practical skills for the workplace.

What we teach. With changed goals comes changed content. Solving contemporary social issues requires that we view traditional content from new perspectives. The 1960s, '70s, and '80s marked the beginning of a shift in which war, civil rights, and health crises forced academics to acknowledge the need for new ways of thinking about the world. Ethnic studies, women's studies, and media studies emerged, while scholars from different scientific disciplines collaborated to form biochemistry and geophysics departments.

Many academics still struggle to accept the validity of interdisciplinary fields, but 21st-century students have no such qualms.

The number of students majoring in interdisciplinary fields has increased by 37 percent since 2003. With such data in mind, many colleges and universities are in the process of redesigning general-education requirements to ensure that all students take courses that emphasize diverse perspectives. Such additional requirements mean that other areas of study — often in traditional Western disciplines — get a smaller piece of the general-education curriculum than before. That doesn't always go over well among faculty members in those fields.

Some professors consider such administrative "intrusions" to be a violation of their academic freedom, but many of the diverse students we teach consider these shifts to be a bare minimum of the curricular reform they favor. Changes in general-education requirements at many colleges were catalyzed by student protests and petitions in the fall of 2015. While there are certainly students who are apathetic or who lament being told what to study, the presence of those who want to learn about, and through, diverse perspectives is evidence of the major cultural shift underway.

How we teach. The notion of the sage on the stage is also going out of style. Being a professor once meant standing on a podium, usually behind a lectern, holding forth to auditoriums of sleep-deprived students. Now 25 percent of undergraduates never even see their professor face-to-face, and those who do are in classrooms where discussions and other forms of student-centered learning are as common as lectures.

This change is certainly influenced by the internet. It ensures that students can easily gain access to information that was once readily provided only to those fortunate enough to have attended college. But many instructors have also been changing the way we teach to correct a problem we see in all too many students: a tendency to think they can just memorize facts, and that counts as learning. Memorization is no longer enough, if indeed it ever was. Students need to be able to do something with facts, not just regurgitate them. That's why many professors are focusing their pedagogy on cultivating higher-order cognitive skills — those well-known upper tiers of Bloom's Taxonomy — and gravitating toward experiential education that emphasizes the application, evaluation, and creation of knowledge.

Labs have always been part of courses in the natural sciences. But now students are also doing textual analysis and original research in their humanities and social-science courses. That kind of work encourages undergraduates to analyze, synthesize, and critique other perspectives while developing their own ideas about a concept.

The complexity of the learning process demands equally complex assessments. We can therefore no longer rely solely on final exams to measure students' learning. Many faculty members have more-authentic assessments that require students to generate solutions to real-world problems.

The presence of more diverse people and ideas in college classrooms has also led to a focus on cultivating students' "soft" skills — that is, nontechnical and interpersonal. Online discussion boards in both traditional and distance learning help students practice their written communication. Group projects foster the collaboration and teamwork necessary in most workplaces. Developing and maintaining blogs and websites ensures that students have experience speaking to a variety of audiences.

As faculty members move away from traditional coursework, students are exposed to the many ways in which knowledge is produced and disseminated in an increasingly diverse society. In turn, professors are expected to model innovative intellectual inquiry. Even on my discussion-based, brick-and-mortar campus, it seems as if every week there is an email about another training session for the latest platform to make teaching more "streamlined" and "efficient."

We can now teach classes without using a single sheet of paper if we have the know-how to upload readings, purchase e-books, download student assignments, and give audio feedback. We can record our lectures, flip our classrooms, and hold office hours online.

The idea that professors could do their jobs without walking into a classroom, writing on the board, and struggling to match faces to names would have been amazing to 19-year-old me.

Where we teach. Perhaps less surprising are changes in the emotional climate of academe. Most institutions now have diversity statements to complement their mission and vision statements. In the 1980s, when racial- and ethnic-minority enrollment began to notably increase, many colleges and universities created diversity/pluralism/multicultural offices and centers, along with cultural-affinity houses.

More recently, institutions are recognizing gender diversity through all-gender bathrooms and through pronoun policies that encourage those on campus to choose the pronouns they prefer for themselves. There also continue to be student organizations, as well as fraternities and sororities, for specific demographic groups.

Those changes in campus climate are largely realized in our classrooms and during interactions with our colleagues. In recognition of diverse life experiences, some colleges now require "trigger warnings" before discussing potentially sensitive issues surrounding race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion. Faculty members are encouraged (and sometimes required) to attend diversity workshops, where they learn about inclusive language and creating safe spaces. Given recent events, sexual harassment has become a hot topic, prompting many institutions to revise their Title IX policies and create confidential reporting mechanisms for potential victims.

A richly diverse species. I can safely say that, in 2018, what it means to be a professor is markedly different from what it meant even as recently as 2008. That change is certainly driven by whom we teach, but it is also a result of a slow but steady change in who is doing the teaching.

In 2015, 23 percent of full-time faculty members (including adjuncts and visitors) were of color, and 49 percent were women. The numbers are surprisingly similar when we only consider tenured and tenure-track faculty members: In 2014, 17 percent of tenured and 21 percent of tenure-track faculty members were of color; in 2015, 38 percent of tenured and 49 percent of tenure-track faculty members were women. And if recent news releases from the University of California at Los Angeles, and at Santa Cruz, and from Princeton University are any indication, more than a few faculty members were first-generation college students.

A more diverse professoriate means more diverse opinions about the changing culture of academe. For each issue I've mentioned — career readiness, online courses, diversity requirements, pronoun policies, trigger warnings, title IX policies — strong voices of opposition are heard among professors worried that such sweeping shifts in campus culture will damage the quality of a college education.

But there is no evidence to suggest that these demographic and cultural changes have yielded poorer student outcomes. And whether we're ready for them or not, these changes are already happening.

The diversity of why, what, how, and where students learn means there is no such thing as a typical professor in 2018. Much has been written about the disappearing tenure-track market, with the number of Ph.D.s outpacing the available openings for years. Indeed, with the

demand for traditional professors not what it used to be, only 52 percent of faculty members are employed in full-time positions. Employment trends in the past 10 years suggest that there will be fewer, not more, tenure-track jobs in the future.

As much as it hurts to say so, it is time for Ph.D.s to envision a new kind of professor — one whose engagement in a particular field is not dependent upon an affiliation with an institution of higher education. The proliferation of open-access journals allows academic work to reach an audience broader and more diverse than ever before. Most professional conferences now offer discounted nonacademic rates and are increasingly reserving presentation slots for Ph.D.s who are not employed in academe.

These new scholars are not bound by the pillars of teaching, service, and scholarship. They are not ensconced within the ivory tower, behind a lectern and in endless committee meetings. Their professional activities can be conducted in the real world, without conflict-of-interest forms. They may teach one or two online courses while working full time in a field where they can apply their knowledge.

Sure, for those Ph.D.s., that means giving up the job security that is absent from almost every other profession. It also means that we as scholars relinquish the prestige that is associated with a faculty title, as well as the self-structured lifestyle to which many of us have become accustomed. But we've already overheard whispered conversations about institutions getting rid of tenure, increasing teaching loads, and limiting conference funds. We will see more online education, not less. And colleges and universities have made public commitments to increase the number of underrepresented students on their campuses.

No matter how much faculty members cling to "the good old days," there is no going back. We might as well embrace the possibility of creating a new kind of academic.