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Community, purpose, and professionalism in the academy

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of "the academic community" in light of tensions around purpose and management in contemporary universities. While often invoked in public discourse, the academic community remains a vague and contested notion. Drawing on Evetts' (2009) distinction between organizational and occupational professionalism, we examine how fragmented universities navigate conflicting demands from stakeholders and internal professional values. We argue that the sustainability of universities as institutions rooted in enduring values depends on a renewed sense of collective purpose, grounded in genuine community. Despite increasing managerialism and commodification, occupational professionalism remains present within academic cultures. To better understand this dynamic, we analyse how the idea of community is expressed in mission statements and policy documents from Icelandic universities. Through content analysis, we assess whether references to "academic" or "university community" align more closely with organizational goals or occupational ideals, offering insights into the evolving identity of higher education.

Full paper

Despite frequent references to "the academic community" in public discourse, one may well wonder what that expression is meant to capture or denote. Is there such a thing as "the academic community", understood as a subset of society at large? Or do academics perhaps form different communities along disciplinary lines, crossing borders between institutions and countries? And if so, which elements of the concept of community are present in these contexts?

This inquiry is particularly relevant in light of ongoing challenges facing universities, especially those concerning their sense of purpose and the nature of professionalism within them. A community, as commonly defined, is a group of people who engage in joint action, are linked by social ties, share common perspectives or other socially significant characteristics, such as place, goals, norms, culture, religion, values, customs, identity, or identity-forming narratives (MacQueen et al., 2001, Lowe, 2017). How do academics, as a

social group, display and enact these characteristics? What is their sense of shared purpose, values, and identity, and how well does this align—or conflict—with stakeholder expectations?

Answering these questions is necessary if universities are to endure as institutions grounded in lasting values and authentic professional commitments. That endurance, however, is far from guaranteed. For decades, universities have been marked by fragmentation and loss of legitimizing purpose, combined with increased commodification of academic work and managerialism in university administration. Readings (1996) famously described the "university in ruins," where pursuit of excellence has displaced any substantive, shared goal. In the "postmodern university", public purposes are eclipsed by private interests, collaboration is replaced by the overarching imperative of competition, and education is increasingly viewed as a consumer good (Donovan, 2016). Likewise, research is framed as an investment in economic growth, expected to yield marketable outcomes (Giroux, 2018). With all these individual and corporate interests at stake, accountability measures are needed to assure anxious stakeholders that universities – and the academic community—are fully focused on serving their interests efficiently.

This managerial turn has generated unease among academics, often accompanied by nostalgia for times when universities were regarded as cohesive communities with an unquestioned common purpose and freedom to pursue it in accordance with their considered values. While such a golden age may never have existed, its image stands in stark contrast to the disjointed realities of many contemporary institutions (Fleming, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that commentators have increasingly called for a renewed sense of purpose for universities (Barnett, 2013, 2017; Collini, 2012, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2021; Kristinsson, 2023; Miller, 2019; Shapiro, 2005). Many candidates for such a purpose have been suggested, but none will be effective unless it is supported by a genuine sense of community and an understanding of common purposes specific to university life.

A helpful framework for conceptualizing tensions between stakeholder expectations and values supported by occupational groups can be found in Evetts' (2009) distinction between organizational professionalism—associated with managerial control, standardized procedures, and external accountability—and occupational professionalism, emphasizing collegial authority, intrinsic professional values, and occupations as moral communities. Evetts (2011) identifies public management at universities in and beyond the UK as instances of organizational professionalism. Siekkinen et al. (2020) found that while organizational professionalism has increased in Finnish universities, occupational professionalism is still deeply entrenched, resulting in a hybridity of occupational and organizational elements. And as Tight (2014) observes, attitudes to collegiality and managerialism vary greatly among academics, depending on their experience.

Fitzpatrick's (2021) inspiring call for a more generous academic culture is highly pertinent in this context. Her argument positions community as a normative and motivational force for institutional change. However, given the intricate relation between community and a sense

of joint purpose and professional identity, surprisingly little research has explored how the idea of "community" itself is employed in university policy and governance—particularly in relation to the strained cohabitation of occupational and organizational professionalism in contemporary universities.

This study aims to contribute to that gap by examining how the concept of community is evoked in mission statements and other official policy documents issued by Icelandic universities. We will use content analysis to identify and interpret how references to the "university community" and "academic community" reflect organizational goals versus occupational values. While the primary focus of our presentation will be the theoretical and conceptual framework for the study, we also plan to present and discuss preliminary findings from our document analysis.