

TOWARD SCHOLAR-ACTIVISM

Crossroads Keynote Talk
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Hiawatha Elementary School
Top 70% of my class

Sachem H.S.
Cut >50 days

Designated a “regular”
by a local deli

It's about
“Making a Difference”

Are scholarship and activism
compatible notions?



© 1995 MCA Television

Dr. Cornel West

“A popular member of Harvard’s faculty, West has been fuming since an October meeting with Lawrence Summers, the school’s new president. According to West, Summers accused him of spending too much time with nonacademic pursuits...”

USA Today – 1/21/2002

Grandson of a Preacher and
shaped at a young age by
political struggle.

Marched for Civil Rights in H.S.

Ivy League product

(Harvard, Princeton, & Yale)

1987 Lead campus protests at
Yale in support of
a clerical union.

Published “Race Matters”
in 1993

(along with 15 other books)

In 1998 appointed University
Professor at Harvard

Criticized for lack of
“scholarly seriousness”

Presidential campaigns, hip-hop album
& summit, “Matrix Re-loaded”,
and parental empowerment

Dr. West has helped
re-define the very notion
of scholarship

A public intellectual

Walter Rodney

Born: March 23, 1942

Assassinated: June 13, 1980

Emancipation of the
“working class” was a direct
outcome of his scholarship on
Black history

Considered by many a radical

Critical of academics with
privilege

He noted we have
“gentle outbursts”
here and there against the
system...but reside in the calm,
but stifling bosom of the
academy

Universities should be places of moral and intellectual authority

Professors should model responsible and politically engaged citizenship

Barriers to exemplifying these values:

1.) The nature of corporate universities

- Contingent labor
- Graduate preparation
- Overall institutional mission

Barriers to exemplifying these values:

2.) Academic Freedom

- Tenure and tenure track
- Research, teaching, and service
- Commercial publishing

Barriers to exemplifying these values:

3.) Lack of organization

- Specialization of faculty

- 1.) The nature of corporate universities
 - Contingent labor

“Tenured Vampire” Nelson & Watt, 2005

Living off part-time labor to
enjoy a position of privilege

Faculty as workers

- not as an agent for change

Approximately 40% of all
faculty on the tenure line

Primary precursor to the
erosion of power

Hierarchy undermines the very nature of the professorate...

when wages, benefits, and working conditions are considered...

the very concept of “faculty” has eroded

1.) The nature of corporate universities

- Graduate Preparation

Since the 1960's, attrition rates from PhD programs has been nearly 50%

Debt averages \$50k

Years to completion = ~7 years

Students versus labor

Qualifying Exam:

What are we qualifying people to do?

Dissertation:

A proto-book vs.
a product with intent

1.) The nature of corporate universities

- Contingent labor
- Graduate preparation
- Overall institutional mission

A market driven enterprise...

Fortune 500 or Top 10?????

Building Projects

Middle Management

Value of a university degree

(Jobs versus democracy)

Undergraduate & graduate

Faculty are the University...

In a corporate era:

buildings, administration,
rankings, etc... establish our
mission for us.

Barriers to exemplifying these values:

2.) Academic Freedom

1940 Statement of Principles on
Academic Freedom and Tenure

“Freedom in the classroom in
discussing their subject...”

NOT a free for all!
But who is protected?

The Tenure-Track

Perform & Conform

UConn Guidelines:

Overall average teaching evaluations of 8+

Publication of an average of at least two articles in referred journals per year

Grant activity and participation

Teach the usual subjects in the usual way...conduct marginal research on conventional topics

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Who makes tenure decisions??

The balancing act of :

Research

Teaching

Service

Research should be about

IMPACT

Quantity does not equal impact

Who is the audience of our work?

Teaching

Consistency between our
(stated) philosophies and our
practice?

Getting a job in academia 101:

“Teaching informs my research
and vice versa...”

The reality: A false dichotomy

Service

Tedious committee work

Some work in schools

Re-thinking service is the key
to activism

A new model for the academy:

Service through Scholarship

Barriers to exemplifying these values:

2.) Academic Freedom

- Tenure and tenure track
- Research, teaching, and service
- Commercial publishing

Commercial Publishing

Who decides what counts as a legitimate publication?

Who is being served by the current reality?

The University Press...
too few – too elite?

Who has access to knowledge
in a market driven model?

Barriers to exemplifying these values:

3.) Lack of organization

– Specialization of faculty

Faculty loyalty:

Department

School/College

University

Discipline

Who is served by this
compartmentalization?

We do not need new structures:

NARST (Strands, Fringe)

AERA (SIGS, Division)

AAUP Membership

120,000 in the 1970's

45,000 today

Strategic conversations...

Science Specific Issues

What urgent topic deserves my attention?

50% of the world's scientists engage in military research

U.S. military action up 30% since the end of the cold war

Important to the field?

Building upon each others'
work...

Important to society?

Advocacy in science:

Environmental work is now
almost considered
“respectable” work

In Conclusion:

Writing is not enough...

Teaching is not enough...

Faux Activism

Write and Translate

Write for scholarship...
translate for public

Working groups/discussions

Course

Conference

Publication

Translation

Activism is leadership...

Leadership is local

We **MUST** get our own
house in order

Universities should be places of moral and intellectual authority

Professors should model responsible and politically engaged citizenship

What issues are you facing at
your own campuses?

A starting point for
scholar-activism

Be warned...truth is not enough

Truth doesn't lead to justice...
action does.

Need goals for action

Things to consider (lessons learned):

Time

Publicity

Documentation

Understanding of the current paradigm

An epistemology of passivity:

Positivist

Postmodern

Value-free

Normative

Disconnected

Interconnected

Theory only

Theory driven

Life of the mind

Life involved

We have had a significant hand
in our own undoing...

If we don't act others will

Who is making steel???

Administrative groups lobbying
to remove the
“original knowledge contribution”
aspect of the PhD

1997 Working Paper (AAHE)

Academic Freedom
Without Tenure

“To clarify the distinction between
advocacy and scholarship”

Join the
S.W.A.T.
Team

Scholars with Activist Tendencies