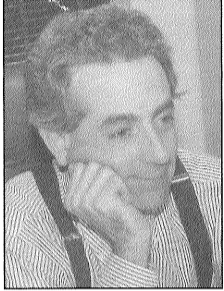


The Life of Homo Academicus

Marketing Educator, Summer 1999, p. 4

Herbert Jack Rotfeld
Auburn University, Alabama
rotfeld@business.auburn.edu

After almost thirty years at the university, Evan had not published a page of research. He stuck his head into Hal's office and asked the junior faculty member, "Have time for an intellectual discussion?" They killed almost two hours.



ROTFELD

They weren't at a major research university, but that didn't stop many business faculty at the midsized regional state school from thinking and discussing ideas. Inside the dean's suite

of offices was a large room that always had fresh coffee and many faculty, department heads, and even the dean would stop by to discuss books, ideas, and news. Business students had almost all their classes on the first floor of the building; the upper three office floors surrounded a central core of lounge chairs in which students would relax, study, or sometimes sleep between classes. The easy access to faculty offices meant that many students would also stop by to talk with current or past teachers and some faculty would themselves sometimes just wander into the area and talk.

Unfortunately, not all faculty enjoyed this arrangement. Oh, they'd hold office hours for students, but they had textbooks to write or consulting reports to complete (mostly the latter). They didn't want to be bothered by conversation. After three years, Hal's contract was terminated by a vote of the tenured faculty. He had published some research, more than most of his colleagues. He was not a superstar in the classroom, but acceptable. Not seeing the inherent contradiction, the chair told Hal that his desires for conversations were a distraction to colleagues, and they felt he would be better off at a school where he could just work alone on his research.

So he went to a research school, in fact, several. But he never enjoyed any place as much as that first teaching-oriented university. But even there, things changed over time. Pressures increased, faculty egos grew and younger faculty did not seem to enjoy old talkers like Evan.

In his autobiography, *Tinker in Television*, former NBC network president and creator of the MTM production studios, Grant Tinker gave a perspective on the "management" of his creative business. Like the academy, good television traffics in ideas. And when he sold MTM, the new managers quickly installed automatic-door closers on all the offices, a factor that discouraged employee interaction and which he saw as the beginning of the end of that enterprise's success. People were no longer talking to each other. They seemed more productive and more "work" was done. But it seemed that the thinking had come to an end.

And increasingly, many universities are no longer intellectual environments. The pressures are too great, and there

are too many things to do. Talking is a luxury. Ideas are a distraction. And our offices all have door closers.

Elsewhere, since the book discussion group was in a campus town, most members were university faculty. Various forms of literature were discussed every month by chemists, engineers, and a business professor or two. The English faculty were asked one day if the group was too much like work for them, but it wasn't. Who had time? Teaching classes, grading papers, and meeting the demands for research output, the book group gave them the only outlet for thinking beyond the demands of work.

So the general question must be asked of all educators: Do you read things other than journals or textbooks or business news? Do you discuss political magazines and books with new ideas unrelated to your work?

In Allegra Goodman's novel, *The Family Markowitz*, one brother worked for a U.S. university and the other sold antiques in Britain. Both were scholars, but it was more the life of the brother working in England. At the American-based university, it had become drudge work, a burdensome job, and no one talked with him about anything. There is too much to do. There are research seminars, but they are narrow, few and, like those we know in our field, more set for showing off than discussion.

Of course, many students complain if the teachers expect too much thinking, writing on the all-important student evaluations that "too many quizzes force me to do all of the readings for each class and take up too much time. We have other things to do with our lives besides study." And the most popular faculty often are the ones that agree with this view. A student told his favorite teacher why some of his classmates disliked the class. "They have a problem with you because you're different. You want them to think."

In theory, faculty are paid to publish research because it feeds to their teaching. Not necessarily that it makes a person a better teacher per se (because that entails all sorts of things with presentations, style, and so on), but because it keeps them current and involved with the "cutting edge" of the work. Many universities encourage research because of the prestige involved with certain researchers, but, for most, research stands as little more than a force to keep the faculty from having their knowledge of the material drift into the nethersphere while their minds slowly churn into the dendrite capability of cottage cheese.

And therein lies the frustration for this work. Faculty are paid to interact with students, but how much they are paid depends on what they do when students aren't around. The job once meant "thinking for a living," but with the pressures for output and measurements of "productivity" and other counting of what research was done, there is not time to discuss. Ideas are too abstract and no one can measure what is thought. To find happiness as a scholar, like in Allegra Goodman's novel, might mean not taking on the life as a job description.

Faculty are to be researchers and teachers. But at too many modern schools, there's no time for scholars.