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“We have a remarkably productive faculty!” a dean says with pride.

“Do we think she will be a productive scholar?” asks a colleague reviewing a candidate for a tenure track position.

“Our doctoral program is #3 on the Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index,” announces a colleague at a faculty meeting.

Over the past years I have been realizing that “productivity” is a word almost omnipresent in my academic life. While I had expected this kind of measurement for classes taught and for service on committees, I have found myself unnerved by its application to scholarly writing. I have come to realize that just as framing students as customers marks the ways that higher education has become increasingly commodified, so do the ways we now mark and manage scholarly productivity. My argument here is that our work life as academics, including our life as writer/scholars, is shaped by increasing pressures to produce measurable output — pressures that make “having a life” ever more challenging.

But before I further explore this development, I need to offer two caveats about the particularity of my perspective. First, I speak from privilege within privilege. Not only do I get to do teaching and scholarship as my job, I am also a tenured faculty member in what used to be called a Research 1 University — now called “RU/VH” or “Research University/Very High Activity.” I have something like the academic job that most doctoral students in the humanities dream about: four classes per year (the majority of which have no more than twenty-five students), doctoral students, and good research support. Nevertheless, I would argue that I still experience the same structural changes that affect someone teaching at a community college, but in different and generally more subtle ways.

My second caveat is that when it comes to scholarship, I am not productive. This reality could lead you to discount anything I say on this topic as self-justification or sour grapes. I have no doubt that my perceptions are colored at least by a pale grape tinge. I can also attribute some of my nonproductivity to various psychological factors such as having a professor father whose writing blocks started when he could not finish his dissertation. But even these more personal factors are deeply shaped by the structures that surround us.

So what determines these criteria of productivity? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, while the Latin roots of “productivity” referred to creative power, the word started to be used in English in the eighteenth century in relation to economic production and eventually came to be linked with terms like “standard” and “measure.” Thus, the concept of productivity emerges from the heart of modern industrialization, indicating a measure of output per unit of input. Karl Marx explained that productivity could only be understood in its specific historic setting so that the measure of being productive is being productive for capitalism by maximizing surplus value (value of output above the value of input). Workers were the key to productivity since much surplus value came from the lack of compensation they received from their output — value that went to the capitalists instead.

Now, this kind of outright exploitation was not, for a long time, part of higher education. Primary and secondary education, along with technical education, could be incorporated into the economic system since they served to shape persons with the skills and attitudes for the workforce (and for citizenship). But higher education, especially in the humanities, did not for a long time seem to offer measurable output. It could, however, be reorganized through the newly emerging forms of professionalization.

By the end of the nineteenth century, colleges and universities began to require doctoral

degrees for their faculties. The formation of intellectual work through professional organizations and journals also began at this time. The [Society of Biblical Literature](#) was founded in 1880, the [Modern Language Association](#) in 1883, the [American Historical Association](#) in 1884, and the [American Philosophical Association](#) in 1900. University professors began to define themselves more by their area of study than by their teaching location or their engagement in social issues. One example of these changes is Richard Ely, who started as a Social Gospel economist, was put on trial for his support of strikes, and, ultimately, shifted his focus to the minutiae of rural land economics (Bledstein 329). Indeed, by 1903 William James could write an essay called “The PhD Octopus,” describing the new “Doctor-Monopoly in teaching,” which in his view was “a tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption.”

By the early twentieth century, university administrators were beginning to frame higher education as a business as they sought to maintain larger and increasingly more complex institutions. Charles Eliot, one of the first professional university administrators, used his forty years of running Harvard University to build an endowment in order to expand the faculty from sixty to six hundred and the student body from sixty to six thousand. He also restructured the university into an undergraduate college and added professional schools and the graduate school of arts and sciences (Bledstein, 130–132, 338). Eliot was probably one of the first leaders in higher education to understand administration — and himself as an administrator — professionally.

The next major period of transformation was the postwar period from 1945 until around 1990. These were expansionary years, fueled by United States economic and political dominance, G.I. Bill funding, and Baby Boomer demographics. With the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s came new access to education for minorities, whose presence in the humanities meant new forms of scholarship and new kinds of classes exploring cultural identity. Not surprisingly, between 1950 and 1990 the number of colleges and universities almost doubled, from 1,851 to 3,535 (Lazerson 1998).

But these new trends in the humanities found themselves struggling against several forces that unfolded during this period. First, Cold War concerns about United States technological preeminence led to increased funding of scientific projects and education, diminishing the role of the humanities in the university. A later challenge was the restructuring of the United States economy, starting with the shock of the 1973 recession and destabilization of the dollar. Blue-collar industrial jobs began to disappear in favor of lower-paying service sector work as

United States economic activity turned to the production of knowledge. This shift was part of a third key change — the overall shifts in the global, social, and economic structures in which knowledge had become a key commodity, able to be accumulated and distributed in extraordinarily comprehensive and rapid ways (Harvey, 159–160).

What have these changes meant for universities? The most gifted students in elite schools began to seek careers in law, medicine, and business. To them, studying the humanities was simply functional to those futures. I cannot count the number of times in the 1970s when I was asked why in the world I would major in the classics — not just by my working-class relatives but by my parents' teacher/professor friends, all themselves trained in the humanities. At the less elite levels, the humanities had long been seen as core curriculum requirements rather than as majors. And with the end of blue-collar jobs, college degrees — not high school diplomas — were minimal requirements for work beyond the lower tiers of the service sector. Across different social levels there came to be agreement about the role of humanities in education: those who want to succeed should not be majoring in humanities.

This growing social understanding was perhaps less visible during the postwar expansionary or golden age of higher education. However, as early as the late 1990s, with a still-booming United States economy, a Rand Corporation report was warning of a severe fiscal crisis in higher education. Its recommendations were significant — not only increased public funding, but “the kind of restructuring and streamlining that successful businesses have implemented... This will entail improving performance-based assessment, defining, and measuring productivity.” (Rand Corporation, 7). Restructuring on business lines is embedded in intense knowledge commodification. At first this profit-making knowledge tended to spin off from the universities, but now the universities were working to control the profits through rights to intellectual properties. For example, my own institution, Emory University, has benefitted enormously from the sale of patents developed by its faculty members. To cite just one instance, it recently received millions of dollars for the [patents for key antiretroviral drugs](#) — funding that has been particularly devoted to supporting research work in virtually all areas of the university.

The knowledge created in the humanities does not often generate this kind of measurable profit. Our typical output is not financially valuable scientific properties or even the kinds of quantitative data useful in industry and government. The kinds of skills fostered by study in the humanities are less tangible. I might term them as tools of depth and breadth: the capacity to analyze or to explore beneath the surface *and* the capacity to see connections and expand one's point of view. Yet we live in an academic world increasingly required to perform along a business model geared toward a more limited form of output. The business model now touches every aspect of my academic life — through PowerPoint and other software that was developed for business use, through consultants for university strategic planning using models taken from Toyota's management strategies, and through struggles with our new financial accounting system which

cannot encompass many of the “inefficiencies” that are part of academic life (Bousquet 90–124).

I am no Luddite and personally embrace many of these changes. Having had older colleagues who seemed to have time for two- to three-hour meetings with no agenda, I welcome organized and goal-oriented meetings. And I love the ways that Blackboard can ease the ways I distribute work to and receive assignments from students. But I am concerned about the unreflective speed with which these changes occur — and the speed they demand of us. And here is where I return more directly to the question of my own productivity, having given some sense of the context in which we are productive. While I cannot directly compare my luxurious degrees of autonomy and relatively high pay scale to the situation of a clerical staff person at my school, I can say that both of us, albeit quite differently, are affected by increased speed. Support staff must clock in and out by phone and have had to adjust to rapidly changing systems of accounting, word processing, web development, etc. Faculty must deal with increasing class sizes, goals and output measurement, and teaching technologies.

Even though there has been a vast increase in administration size, there is also a vast increase in the managerial work done by faculty. My father cherished academic life as a leisurely life — complete with free summers — that was in stark contrast to the automobile factory line that shaped his own father’s work life. As I moved into my academic career, it was hard for him to recognize how different my life was. Much more of my time is, for example, devoted to “management” — even when I am not actually in an administrative job. I complete reports that demand forms of data gathering, write grants and manage their budgets, maintain communication networks, etc. Complex institutions require complex inputs. And the productivity of those who deliver the product — the knowledge producers — must be measured and assessed by the new “objective” standards this knowledge has made possible.

Certain forms of productivity — how many grants you receive, how many students you teach, how many committees you chair — can be fairly easily measured. But scholarly productivity might appear to be more difficult to measure. How does one rank “good” work, especially across fields? The measurement used in tenure and promotion has been left to the judgment of peers — thus the external letters of evaluation. The professional guilds still control the standards of scholarship, in contrast to the standards for teaching and service that can be handled by administrators. In the [Scholarly Productivity Index](#) for Faculty in PhD Programs, five factors are measured: books published, journal publications, degree of citations, federal/grant dollars awarded, and honors/awards. There is some weighing across disciplines and within categories (evidently a Nobel Prize earns you productivity points for fifty years), but quantity generally wins out.

Often academics in the humanities react to these trends with a “how dare you” kind of truculence, championing art or scholarship for its own sake. But demands for a degree of relevance and accountability are not unreasonable. We in the humanities seem to have difficulty naming positive criteria that nurture the kinds of knowledge that can contribute to a public good — possibly because all of us are nervous about trying to name these goods. But without this kind of conscious reflection, we fall into a default mode that simply accepts quantifiable criteria — as long as these products appear in “our” scholarly media. Lindsay Waters, an editor at Harvard University Press, quips, “Countability is the thing whereby you’ll catch the conscience of the dean, as a friend of Hamlet might advise the young Danish assistant professor or the young Shakespeare scholar” and goes on to suggest that academics “reinvigorate the sentences we write, so that, when one reads an essay, one feels it.” (Waters, 2008). The irony may be that the lenses we use, those capacities for depth and breadth, *are* actually a contribution, since they enable forms of reflection upon the projects in which we are engaged and the contexts in which we live.

As he reflected upon the emerging industrial order, Karl Marx wrote, “To be a productive worker is, therefore, not a piece of luck, but a misfortune” (Marx, 1967: 509). If we actually considered what “productive” is and what it might be, attentive to our own experiences and those of different persons around us, we might begin to imagine some ways of “being productive” that could reform the social relations of education so that not only faculty, but also students, staff, and administrators could “have a life.”

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