

Chapter 2

Academe: A Profession Like No Other

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Philip Altbach has studied the academic profession for over 50 years, beginning with his 1963 master's thesis at the University of Chicago, "James B. Conant as Educator and Policy Maker." In addition to publishing scores of books, reports, articles, and op-ed pieces examining various aspects of this profession, he also inspired countless others to join its ranks and study it as well. Further, through his commitment to excellence in research, teaching, and service, he has modeled for us the best of what an academic can be. Thus, it is fitting that a *Festschrift* in his honor includes a discussion about a topic that he has always considered of utmost importance, having once referred to the academic profession as "the heart of any academic enterprise" and suggesting that "the future of the university lies in the hands of the professoriate" (Altbach 2004).

Of course, many of his colleagues have concurred with Altbach's sentiments about the profession, noting that it is through the work of academics—developing and disseminating knowledge—faculty ensure that their colleges and universities contribute to the social good (Meyer 2012). However, the wealth of scholarly literature on the academic profession creates a daunting challenge for anyone tasked with writing a brief yet meaningful book chapter on this topic. While recognizing that there is far more than can be addressed here, this essay will examine the following topics: (1) the history and contemporary nature of faculty roles, responsibilities, and rewards; (2) research on the academic profession; and (3) key changes and challenges facing the professoriate. Altbach's contributions to the study of these topics will also be highlighted throughout the essay.

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A Brief History and Contemporary Trends

To begin with, there are literally hundreds of books and articles one can turn to as sources for studying the history and contemporary nature of faculty roles, responsibilities, and rewards. But as a way of synthesizing this research, a review of one man's journey through the academic profession can yield many valuable insights. For example, imagine the life of a professor in a different era—if Philip Altbach had been an academic during the twelfth century, when the first European universities were being founded, he would have enjoyed being part of a “community of masters and students” in Bologna, Salerno, or Paris, where “academics formed guild-like associations of medieval masters with a growing feeling of shared beliefs and mutuality across institutions” (Enders 2006). However, he would not have had the kind of academic freedom that is familiar to many faculty today. During these early centuries, church and civil authorities placed restrictions on the academic community in terms of teaching, research, and public expression (Altbach 2000b).

If instead he had lived during the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, he would have seen innovations like the establishment of new disciplines, departmentalization of knowledge, and new kinds of scientific inquiry (Enders 2006). Constraints on academic freedom were also loosened during this era, with the rise of the Humboldtian university model in Germany bringing with it the ideas of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*—freedom to teach and to learn (Altbach 2000b). In contrast, had Philip been a member of the American professoriate during the 1950s, he would have seen how a climate of anti-communist hysteria led some government authorities to challenge academic freedom, and in some cases—especially in public universities in California and New York—a number of professors were forced to resign (Altbach 2000b). Or, if he had been a professor in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, he would have witnessed large numbers of professors and students being jailed, forced into exile, or even killed by repressive military regimes.

An individual's experience in the academic profession is framed by contexts of time and place. As Christine Musselin (2007) notes, the life and work of an academic has changed significantly throughout history: “There is clearly no ideal, universal, and stable state of the academic profession. Like all social bodies, this profession is a living entity, adaptive and responsive to external changes.” And, as described later in this essay, there is every reason to believe this profession will continue to change throughout the foreseeable future.

The academic profession that Altbach entered in the mid-1960s has been largely defined by the trilogy of research, teaching, and service. These components of the academic role have shown remarkable durability since the end of World War II (Finkelstein 1997). Faculty of that era also wielded more power than their predecessors. For several centuries faculty had served at the pleasure of their board of trustees (Metzger 1973) and could be dismissed at any time, but the late 1800s and early 1900s saw the rise of a new institutionalized career path and the growing power of entities like the American Association of University Professors, which in 1940 issued a statement calling for a system of permanent faculty tenure (Finkelstein

1997; van Alstyne 1995). By the time Altbach joined the profession, this contemporary tenure system was well established, as were faculty governance structures and an increasing role for faculty to influence institutional decision-making.

For every member of this profession, however, the type of institution at which they work has a major impact on their roles, responsibilities, and rewards (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995; Finkelstein 1984; Fulton and Trow 1974; Ruscio 1987). The most dramatic institutional contrasts are seen between various segments of a country's higher education system and particularly between research universities and community colleges. At the former, where Altbach chose to work, faculty typically deal with pressures (and incentives) to publish in top-ranked journals and attract external funding, in addition to teaching (presumably) high-caliber courses at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degree levels. Meanwhile, if Altbach had chosen instead to work at community colleges—which enroll over half of America's 20 million undergraduates, many of them first-generation students with jobs and dependents—his work would have centered around teaching undergraduate courses, sometimes in significantly larger classrooms than his counterparts at other institutions, and he may have only rarely engaged in academic research.

Because of Altbach's choice to join a university and become an active research scholar, he quickly became acquainted with the old mantra of “publish or perish” and began working to build an international reputation through peer-reviewed scholarly journals (sometimes referred to as the “coin of the realm” in academe), books, academic conferences, and research grants. Over the course of his career, he published over 90 refereed journal articles, over 70 books, a dozen special issues of journals, and dozens of book chapters, among many other kinds of publications. Altbach also established a research center on comparative education at the State University of New York at Buffalo, which he directed in 1977–1994, and then founded the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College in 1994, which he continues to lead today. A significant focus of these research efforts has been to promote a comparative and international view of the academic profession, encouraging faculty in one country to learn from faculty in other countries. The need to view academe as a global profession is described in greater detail later in this essay.

Of course, like almost all his colleagues worldwide, Altbach developed and taught many courses, embracing this critical role of the academic as teacher and mentor of others. In truth, the academic profession worldwide is mainly a teaching profession (Enders 2006), as discussed later in this essay. A professor's use of time in the classroom is considered throughout the academic profession to be under the full authority of the instructor, with little or no interference by the institution. Faculty also rely on their institutional administration for things that can impact their teaching activities, such as physical space (the size and layout of the classroom, the chairs, lighting, sound, climate, and so forth) and tools (chalkboard, overhead projector and screen, Internet connectivity, etc.). As a result, faculty necessarily enter into a partnership with their employing institutions in order to ensure an effective learning experience for their students. Simpson (1990) describes a form of faculty “institution-dependency,” noting that “academic professionals, unlike other

professional groups, are very dependent on the institutions they serve for development of their careers. Doctors, lawyers, and the clergy, for example, are not bound to hospitals, the system of courts, or to churches alone to meet their career goals. Professors, however, cannot profess without the benefit of the college or university.” Throughout his career, Altbach was fortunate to work at several well-resourced institutions, where the facilities were reasonably good and did not have a negative impact on his teaching effectiveness. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the plight of millions of academics worldwide who struggle daily to foster learning in less hospitable environments.

And finally, like most members of the professoriate, Philip engaged in various kinds of service to his institution, community, discipline, and broader society. At the institutional level, faculty work on curriculum development initiatives, personnel (search, hiring, and promotion) committees, faculty senates, and much more. In some cases, like Philip’s, faculty are asked to serve a term as their department chair (he did this twice). Some academics are also heavily engaged in their local community, participating in capacity-building initiatives, leading workshops, consulting, and supervising experiential and service learning programs for their students. Often, faculty are called upon to offer expert advice to political decision-makers at local, state, and national levels, and some embrace the role of “public intellectuals,” writing op-ed pieces, providing interviews for journalists, and even testifying at Congressional hearings. Philip seemingly reveled in this public intellectual role, publishing scores of op-eds in newspapers like *The Boston Globe*, *The Japan Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Times of India*, and *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong).

Meanwhile, service to the discipline is also common throughout the academic profession and may include journal editing, peer-reviewing articles, and participating in conference programs and special events. Here, Altbach is well known among his colleagues for his editorship of scholarly journals including *Higher Education* (1974–1995), *Comparative Education Review* (1978–1988), *Educational Policy* (1986–2004), the *Review of Higher Education* (1996–2004), the *International Journal of Educational Development* (1989–1994), and of course the globally circulated *International Higher Education*, which he founded in 1995 and continues editing today. Because of his research productivity and his contributions to the discipline, Altbach is a recipient of the Howard R. Bowen Distinguished Career Award from the Association for the Study of Higher Education (2008) and the Lifetime Contribution Award from the Comparative and International Education Society (2010), among other prestigious awards bestowed by his colleagues.

Through his life’s work, Altbach demonstrated how faculty worldwide contribute to the production and transfer of knowledge at the global, disciplinary, and individual levels. Some have referred to the academic profession as a “calling,” with special responsibilities to society (Altbach 2000a; Hermanowicz 1998; Shils 1983). Furniss (1981) describes the academic profession as a “one life, one career” professional, and others have observed how faculty are conditioned to believe they are committing themselves for a lifetime to a discipline (Simpson 1990). It is also a very important profession for society—Jurgen Enders recently suggested that

“faculty are the heart and soul of higher education and research” (Enders 2006) while the British social historian Harold Perkin described the academic profession as “the profession that educates the other professions” (Perkin 1969). Because of the unique kind of work they do, academics have traditionally been granted a great deal of autonomy—freedom to control the use of their time (Altbach 2000a)—and the opportunity to do interesting work and develop a prominent reputation among one’s colleagues (Enders 2006). There is a good deal of respect accorded to members of the academic profession, with most sociological studies of occupational prestige indicating that academics rank among the highly esteemed groups in society (Altbach 2000a), and this phenomenon has been heavily researched over the past few decades, by Altbach and his contemporaries (cf. Altbach 1997a, b, 2000a, b, 2009; Boyer et al. 1994; Kehm and Teichler 2012).

Research on the Academic Profession: A Brief Overview

Generally speaking, research on the academic profession can be organized into certain categories, the largest of which includes what Finkelstein (1984) termed “demographic portraits”—studies of the socioeconomic backgrounds, disciplinary affiliations, work preferences and habits, and research interests of faculty (cf. Boyer 1990, 1996; Bayer 1973; Bechler and Trowler 2001; Braxton and Hargens 1996; Finkelstein et al. 1998; Ladd and Lipset 1973, 1975; Ladd 1976; Light 1974; Murray et al. 1990; Noll and Rossi 1966; Nora and Olivas 1988; O’Meara et al. 2009; Schuster and Finkelstein 2008). Some demographic portrait studies have contributed to our understanding of how academics influence the shape of postindustrial societies (cf. Lipset 1979), while others have identified common themes among academics throughout the world (cf. Boyer et al. 1994; Altbach et al. 1994; Altbach and Lewis 1995; Altbach 1997a, b; Forest 2001; Kogan and Teichler 2007; Kehm and Teichler 2012). Major organizations like the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT), the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), and the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (NCPTLA) have played significant roles in promoting and facilitating this kind of research.

An academic’s experiences are significantly influenced by the kind of institution at which they are employed, with (for example) research universities offering different responsibilities and rewards than community colleges (Gumport 1991; Clark 1997; Forest 2001). Altbach used a framework of “centers and peripheries” to conceptualize how academic work experiences vary according to differences across types of institutions. Within a given country, research universities often dominate the landscape while community colleges and trade schools (though larger in numbers of institutions and enrollments) are all too often unheralded and under-resourced. Viewed in the broadest sense, “the powerful universities and academic systems—the centers—have always dominated the production and distribution of knowledge. Small and weaker institutions and systems with fewer resources and

lower academic standards—the peripheries—have tended to be dependent on them” (Altbach 2006). Thus, an academic’s experiences in the profession are significantly affected by where they are employed (Fulton 1996).

Altbach’s framework of centers and peripheries helps understand the complex nature of academic work (Altbach 1981, 1998a, 2002), particularly when looking at global patterns of influence within a specific discipline. For example, the experiences of a political scientist working in Bangladesh will differ significantly from those of a political scientist in the UK or the USA. One result of this differentiation is that some academics from particular countries will go find work in other countries with better salaries and working conditions than are available at home (Altbach 2006).

Overall, researchers have identified how a multiplicity of cultures shape faculty identities—the culture of the profession, the culture of the disciplines, the culture of the institution and department (Tierney 1988), and the cultures of institution types (Austin 1990). Other studies have incorporated themes of individual and group identity and the role of professional socialization (cf. Van Maanen 1976).

More recent studies have explored the dichotomy of academic commitments (to institution or academic field) further, with scholars noting that faculty are both locals and cosmopolitans (Gouldner 1957; Forest 2001), combining loyalty to their institutions and to their professional disciplines. This is obviously unique—it is difficult to think of other professions in which the same kind of contrasting loyalties must be navigated on a daily basis. Some faculty prefer to teach rather than conduct research, and as a result they typically spend somewhat more time on local or campus-related activities (teaching, service, and administration) than do those who prefer research over teaching (Altbach and Lewis 1995). Similarly, teaching-oriented faculty worldwide are significantly different from their research-oriented colleagues in their views about the assessment of teaching, about the conditions under which they work, about their academic disciplines and the profession, and about the international dimensions of higher education (Forest 2001).

In sum, there is a significant body of research that reveals how members of the contemporary academic profession have multiple identity frameworks that define the kind of work they do, the resources at their disposal, and the kinds of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that may result from this work. For virtually his entire career, Altbach has encouraged us to adopt an international and comparative perspective toward these issues, noting that cross-national studies of the academic profession are increasingly useful for “recognizing both the common challenges facing the academy worldwide and the increasing international connections of the professoriate” (Altbach and Lewis 1995). Exploring the impact of these “common challenges,” and what should be done about them, has also been a central theme in Altbach’s scholarship.

Challenges Facing the Modern Professoriate

A considerable amount of scholarship has been published in recent years describing the many changes and challenges faced by members of the academic profession (cf. Altbach 2006, 2008, 2009; Brennan 2006, 2007; Schuster and Finkelstein 2008;

Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Cummings and Finkelstein 2012; Gappa 2001; Gappa et al. 2007; Hermanowicz 2011). In a March 1980 article “The Crisis of the Professoriate,” Altbach described how the expansion of higher education systems coupled with pressures for reform and accountability “have endangered the traditional professorial role.” Nearly two decades later, he observed that “(t)he academic profession faces significant challenges everywhere ... the privatization of public higher education and the expansion of private academic institutions in many countries have changed the configuration of academe. Questions about the relevance of much academic research have been linked to demands that professors teach more. The traditional high status of the professoriate has been diminished by unrelenting criticism in the media and elsewhere” (Altbach 1997b). Meanwhile, Enders (2006) points to an academic profession that seems to have lost some of its political standing and bargaining power within society, and Musselin (2007) identifies a loss of control that is widely felt by the academic community.

Further, one of the most important influences on the academic profession worldwide today is the continuing expansion—or “massification” (Trow 1972)—of higher education systems (Scott 1995; Altbach 2008). The forces of expansion have brought many changes to higher education institutions, and these in turn have had a dramatic impact on the working conditions for faculty. Meanwhile, an equally alarming trend in recent decades has been the declining proportion of full-time tenure-track jobs available to academics. Institutions are responding to the dual pressures of expansion and funding constraints by hiring more part-time and contingent faculty to teach undergraduate courses (Musselin 2007). About two-thirds of the academic staff in the USA are either part-time faculty or full-time faculty who are not eligible for tenure and often hired on annual or short-term contracts (Altbach 2008). Recent graduates of even the most prestigious doctoral programs have found themselves coddling together part-time appointments at two or three institutions, becoming a “taxi cab” or “freeway flyer” instructor, racing from one classroom to another across town—a phenomenon that has been well known in Latin America for decades, but is now increasingly prevalent in Europe and the USA as well (Enders 2006). Part-time faculty are often hired to teach one or two courses with absolutely no job security or benefits; they are not well paid and typically have no incentive or responsibilities to engage in research, develop curriculum, advise and mentor students, participate in academic governance, or do any of the other things that regular faculty have traditionally done (Gappa and Leslie 1995; Altbach 2008). This, in turn, means that the shrinking numbers of full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty share an ever-increasing proportion of the responsibilities of a traditional professoriate.

At the same time, funding constraints have also led to more bureaucratic and administrative structures (Altbach et al. 2012), and institutions worldwide are placing new demands on faculty to do more with less. New mechanisms have been established for faculty assessment and accountability, in part driven by legislative or trustee mandates and local populations growing more and more disenchanted with rising tuition and fees. Tenure and other mechanisms protecting the autonomy of faculty have eroded; in Britain, tenure was abolished as part of a major university

reform (Altbach 2006), and in places like Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, Iran, China, Vietnam, and Cuba, there are various kinds of restrictions placed on the activities of the professoriate. Intervention by university leaders in the academic decisions of the professoriate, in particular with regard to matching curricular offerings with market demands, has become commonplace throughout higher education (Musselin 2007).

Not only are assessment and control changing, but incentives and rewards are used to shape the kinds of things academics do. For example, as colleges and universities become more entrepreneurial in a postindustrial economy, they focus on knowledge less as a public good than as a commodity to be capitalized on in profit-oriented activities, and this leads them to develop, market, and sell research products, educational services, and consumer goods in the private marketplace (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, 2009). As a result, faculty have become increasingly involved in new occupationally focused degree programs, online educational services, and technology transfer partnerships with the private sector.

Underscoring these and other modern challenges is a clash of cultures—a faculty culture of professional collegiality and a managerial culture attuned to market economics (Rice and Finkelstein 2002). In the former, activities are organized around securing grants and producing high-caliber research; rigorous systems of peer review and tenure; an emphasis on graduate (particularly doctoral) education and professional socialization; and a commitment of time and effort within the disciplines. In the latter, the main concerns are over cost-effectiveness, accountability, efficiency, and productivity, with an overarching commitment of time and effort toward securing the future of the institution (Rice and Finkelstein 2002). Not only do these competing cultures impact a faculty member's working conditions, but the evaluation of their teaching, research, and service differs considerably depending on which of these is dominant at their employing institution.

Other kinds of external forces have also impacted the working conditions for academic professionals. For example, various forms of information technology have found their way into college and university classrooms and facilitate an increasing array of online degree programs and courses. The global spread of these technologies has also enabled new forms of cross-national academic collaboration. At the same time, the amount of information available at one's fingertips has led to a reducing market for scholarly journals and presses, creating new challenges for junior faculty to find suitable outlets for publishing their research. Concerns have been raised over the intellectual property rights of materials (lecture slides, commentary, audio and video clips, and so forth) that have been made available online. And at some institutions there are ongoing debates over whether publishing in one of the new online academic journals—even those that are peer reviewed—should count toward a person's tenure and promotion qualifications.

This discussion would surely be incomplete without some mention of how globalization has impacted the professoriate. Given the centrality of the knowledge economy to twenty-first-century development (Altbach 1998b), a university education is being increasingly seen as a product that can be marketed globally. As a result, while recognizing that academic freedom and autonomy are clearly

important, faculty are facing pressures to internationalize their curriculum, their courses, their research, and their professional networks. They must ensure that today's students are well prepared to succeed in a globally interdependent world, and that their research contributes meaningfully to internationally networked academic disciplines.

Meanwhile, in many countries the rise in global mobility of graduate students and faculty has led to a brain drain phenomenon through which promising young academics from developing countries are lured to wealthier, industrialized (and usually Western) countries instead of staying home and contributing to the desperate developmental needs of their home countries. These and other critical issues related to the impact of globalization on the academic profession are examined in chapters by Martin Finkelstein, Laura Rumbley and Liz Reisburg, and Alma Maldonado. But the important point to recognize here is that the traditional roles of faculty have changed in several ways, some of which are a result of globalization, and this, in turn, reinforces the importance of incorporating an international and comparative lens when studying the academic profession.

Concluding Thoughts

In much of the world, half or more of the professoriate is getting close to retirement (Altbach 2009). On Monday, May 14, 2012, Altbach delivered his final class lecture before retiring from the full-time faculty at Boston College. During his 47 years of teaching, Philip Altbach demonstrated how one academic with the right mix of personal and professional attributes can produce an array of positive impacts on the lives of countless others. He inspired thousands of students like me to go forth and make our own contributions to the world as members of this academic profession. Beyond what we learned in his courses, he taught us that this is a profession of service, requiring perseverance, curiosity, an ability to collaborate with others, and a strong work ethic.

He encouraged and enabled others to join him in studying higher education and the academic profession from an international and comparative perspective. However, this research has also highlighted the increasing changes in the working conditions of faculty, including massive expansion of higher education systems, coupled with funding constraints, growing calls for assessment and accountability of professors, and an increasingly bureaucratic institutional culture in which faculty are expected to do more with fewer resources. Other prominent changes and challenges include a perceived deterioration of professional autonomy, the rise of market-driven degree programs, the impact of information technology on teaching and research, and the globalization of educational and knowledge networks. We are seeing a decline in professional socialization and autonomy, especially for new members of the professoriate (who are less likely to be full-time, tenure-track), and diminishing faculty power to shape the higher education enterprise. The decrease in most countries in the status of academics in terms of income, prestige, or social

position (Henkel 2000) has paralleled a diminished sense of community among the professoriate. Because these trends are global and enduring, there is every reason to believe we will see many more changes in the professoriate throughout the foreseeable future.

But despite these challenges, it is still a great profession that brings special opportunities to make a lasting impact on this world. Members of the professoriate are encouraged and enabled to develop new knowledge, integrate the knowledge of others, develop the intellectual capacity of future generations, and much more. Perhaps for this reason, this is the only profession in which we see *Festschriften* or anything remotely like these celebratory publications honoring a respected scholar during his or her lifetime. For those of us who are now following in the footsteps of Philip Altbach, and for those whom we will inspire to follow us in the future, we have an important responsibility to keep in mind. The opportunity we have to make a lasting impact on the lives of others, year after year, is clearly a special gift that should never be squandered or taken for granted. While research grants and prestigious publications are certainly valuable in their own right, it is through the intellectual development of future generations that academics truly make significant contributions to this world. This surely is a unique profession, one like no other.

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