

TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

THE JOHN L. AND SUE ANN WEINBERG PROFESSOR IN THE
HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION

TO: Chuck Kinzer and Roger Anderson; cc: Graeme Sullivan
FROM: Robbie McClintock
SUBJECT: Your query:
My scholarly aspirations, support needs, and place in the College
DATE: April-10-2007

I study Western cultural history, seeking to understand the educative influences that shaped historical life within it. More specifically, I have three sustained interests. The first concerns the relation between educational theory and political theory in historical life since 1750. The second examines how changes in communication technologies (alphabet, print, computer) shift the spectrum of educational possibilities. The third explores how the self-directing student, his study, exerts the historical agency responsible for human purpose and educational achievement. I seek to engage myself and others in thinking reflectively about the historical situation in which we find ourselves, as educators. I want to do this as a writer, publishing criticism and scholarship that will make its readers think with greater awareness and conviction, and as a teacher, joining with students in an open-ended inquiry about the educative resources offered to us through our intellectual history.

Outwardly, the College supports my work well. I enjoy the perks of an endowed chair (although I am not yet sure after five years whether the perks extend to anything beyond an imposing title). Program coordinators, department chairs, and college-wide administrators have facilitated my recent efforts to move my base appointment into Arts and Humanities while continuing to offer one course in Communication, Computing, and Technology. But even if these changes work out very well, I expect two problems will continue in my conditions of work, one from which all at TC suffer and another more specific to those of us with interests like mine. The first: excessive committee work will absorb much time and energy, which should be available for serious scholarship. The second: the autarky of most programs will prevent each faculty member who does not fit snugly into a particular one from reaching many students who might be both interested in him and interesting to him.

Only significant structural changes can solve the first problem. I have views about these, but they are not pertinent here. The second problem also requires significant changes, and they are relevant to your query. Faculty members like me, whose work is interstitial to particular programs, are suffocating. Teachers College, shamefully, has no discussion about the common knowledge that all professional educators should share. Have you ever met a doctor grossly ignorant of anatomy? A lawyer who draws a blank over torts or contracts? But can you predict what knowledge current graduates in English education, in social studies, or the teaching of science will have in common? Education will persist as a derided, wannabe profession until its members decide what knowledge they must hold in common and obligate all their members to acquire it. I intend to find ways to ensure that before Teachers College offers any specialties, it prescribes a commonality, one that is substantial, difficult, and compelling. Such a development will require substantial resources in faculty and staff, money, and program time.

Throughout my career, I have thought of myself as a member of the Columbia faculty, situated in its graduate school of education, and I have found that situation both engaging and frustrating. The Teachers College that engages me embodies the norms and expectations of a great research university, performs expansively its component functions within the whole, and joins in tackling, fully as a peer, the shared responsibility to speak truth to power in all ways possible. The Teachers College that frustrates me worries in self-absorption about institutional management and personal careers, doing everything *comme il faut*. Intellectually, we need to be tougher, edgier. Great universities, and their component schools, need individuals who speak, neither through their offices nor through their fields and academic associations, but through the public force of their scholarship and criticism. So far, I feel I have failed to achieve such a voice, which nevertheless I think I can and should develop within and through the academic community. Doing so would enhance the College, and to do so well, I need conditions of work conducive to it: time, concentration, and unstinting effort.