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The Academic Meritocracy: Its Origins and Future

David Katz
Michigan State University

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"Virtue," Emerson assures us, "is the only reward of virtue." Yet, as every academic knows, this seemingly elementary axiom has long been obsolete. Indeed, the very meaning of virtue has changed since Emerson's day, when the concept referred to a quality of being acquired through intense introspection and manifested in one's daily relations with others. As currently defined in the academy virtue is simultaneously more tangible and more prosaic. It is the status one acquires through the accumulation of certain types of credits: assignment to prestigious committees, active participation at professional meetings and, especially, a suitably impressive list of publications. Quantity rather than quality of production has often become the true foundation of virtue in academe as elsewhere in American society. In the academic milieu, this principle sometimes assumes a stark simplicity: one book, for example, may be "worth" an assistant professorship; two books, associate status; three books, the Nirvana of "flag rank" and the envious glances of those further down the professorial hierarchy.

Usually, however, the rules of the game are somewhat more complex. The players, rather than striving to achieve explicit, pre-established performance criteria, actually compete against each other in a never ending contest of one-upmanship. It is this ideal type meritocratic system (so curiously reminiscent of the Soviet "socialist emulation" competitions, c. 1935) which now appears to prevail in most academic departments. The purpose of this article is to briefly consider some of the historical and sociological factors which help to account for the system's growth, pervasiveness and durability.

American entrance into the Second World War provides a logical starting point for such an investigation. Until 1941, American higher education was basically a two-tiered arrangement consisting of a handful of
“Establishment” institutions, which functioned as finishing schools for the older segments of the upper- and upper-middle-classes, and a much larger network of “provincial” institutions, whose largely native-born, middle-class graduates staffed the lower echelons of the professions as well as similar slots in the corporate and entrepreneurial business world.¹

The socio-economic status of the system’s faculty generally corresponded to that of their students, but there were significant differences between the two groups. To borrow Robert Merton’s famous typology,² the prewar professoriat contained an inordinate number of “ritualists” and “rebels,” i.e., individuals who rejected the competitive and materialistic values prevailing in the larger society. Adoption of this outsider role, which like any form of deviance can be ascribed to various causes, had significant psychological and materials costs, but it also had numerous compensations; e.g., ample leisure for the cultivation of research interests as well as a certain collective esprit, which developed easily within the confines of relatively small, homogeneous academic communities.³

Academe’s isolation and gemeinschaftlich environment were irrevocably shattered by the war. For the first time in American history, academic institutions were required to extensively synchronize their daily operations with those of the larger society. “Establishment” and “provincial” universities alike were rapidly transformed from intellectual enclaves into scientific and intelligence bases mobilized to defend the nation. This sudden and profound shift in academic-societal relations (symbolized most dramatically by the Manhattan Project) affected a major change in the conventional conception of the academic and the academic’s conception of himself. Most importantly, opportunities for garnering research funds and influence within powerful and hitherto inaccessible non-academic circles encouraged some professors to shed their previous identities as marginal, cloistered and essentially passive individuals and to assume a new role: that of the academic entrepreneur adept at dealing with politicians, military brass and businessmen in the calculative, manipulative style of the larger society. This radically revised self-image also carried over into dealings with colleagues, who were now often perceived as actual or potential rivals in a game of increasingly high stakes. To be a winner in that game required not only a well developed political sense, but also a demonstrated capacity for achieving “results,” a criterion often measured in terms of both quantity and quality of production. In short, by 1945, innovative academics were already acquiring the self-image and competitive ethos which ideally characterize the members of a meritocracy.⁴

Postwar developments further accelerated the emergence of a fully realized meritocratic system. Two factors were especially important in this regard: increasingly generous outside support for university-based research, and the massification of higher education. During the period 1945-1968, universities were fully integrated into a new government-business-education axis, while federal support for research was broadened into new domestic policy areas. This new arrangement was
in marked contrast to academic-government cooperation in the same areas during the Thirties. At that time, a small, elite "Brains Trust" of "Establishment" professors, e.g., Columbia's Rexford Tugwell and A. A. Berle, had entered government service to help plan New Deal social and economic strategy. In contrast, in the Fifties and Sixties, government entered the universities to solicit expert guidance and research from a much enlarged corps of domestic advisors. This process reached a climax of sorts in the middle Sixties, when significant numbers of social scientists qua policy advisors were inducted to fight the War on Poverty.

During the same period, another segment of the professoriat was being mobilized to fight on America's "second front," i.e., the Cold War. One can, in fact, trace a clear correlation between the shifting political focus of that struggle and the federally funded research interests of American political scientists specializing in foreign affairs. Basically, the following distinct stages are discernible:

1. 1945-1954, the bipolar period of direct Soviet-American confrontation, during which institutional sub-units like the Russian Research Center at Harvard received large government subsidies to study Soviet society, strategy, and resources.

2. 1955-1961, the grand strategy era, marked by intense debate over nuclear and conventional strategy options and the alleged American scientific/technological inferiority versus the Soviet Union. Witnessed the emergence of prominent university and "think-tank" consultants, e.g., Henry Kissinger and Herman Kahn, as well as massive increases in federal support for research in the physical sciences.

3. 1962-1968, the "petit" strategy period, in which academics provided political decision-makers with numerous studies on the causes of socio-political disequilibrium in the Third World.

The moral implications of these increasingly intimate government-university connections have been pondered by many observers; the meritocratic implications of the relationship have been relatively ignored. Nevertheless, this much is clear; if World War II was the meritocracy's "take-off" phase, then the postwar era was the system's period of maturation. The intersecting exigencies of international crisis and domestic change encouraged the inclusion of an ever larger and more varied segment of the professoriat within the system's orbit. Moreover, successive shifts in grantor (i.e., government) areas of concern, especially but not exclusively in the foreign policy field, stimulated a capacity for nimble adaptibility among potential grantees. Finally, the uncertainty over future grantor needs helped to heighten both anxiety and rivalry within professional ranks: successful meritocratic competition increasingly required a keen awareness of present and future grantor needs and a proven "track record," i.e., an impressive bibliography, which could project the competitor into the front ranks of those applying for research support.

Changes in the institutional relationship between government and university thus helped to foster an ideal meritocratic climate characterized
by insatiable status anxiety and an intensely competitive orientation. At the same time, intra-institutional change—viz., the massification of higher education, coupled with the proliferation of new academic specialties—increasingly inhibited communication within departments. Under these conditions, the "clubby" ambience of prewar days could no longer be sustained; evaluation of professional competence and accomplishment became progressively more impersonal and quantitative as the expanded professoriat itself became increasingly atomized and specialized. The biblical injunction "Verily, ye shall know them by their works" thus acquired a new and rather literal meaning for those who entered the academy after World War II.

Will the meritocracy survive in the years ahead? Until the late Sixties, such a question would never have been raised: the steady growth of the meritocratic system seemed assured; its harsh but seemingly equitable logic was generally accepted, even by those whose mediocre talents and limited competitive drive consigned them to the ultimo. Theses of academe.

Recently, however, there have been a number of new developments which collectively pose a serious threat to the survival of meritocratic values. In order of importance, these are:

1. the precipitous post-1968 decline in federal support for the natural and social sciences. Availability of these research funds undoubtedly stimulated academic productivity and competition in the 1942-1968 period. Consequently, their loss has had some deleterious effect.

2. the impact of "affirmative action" and related policies, which, whatever their normative validity, are in clear conflict with meritocratic principles.

3. the virtual collapse of the academic job market in many fields. As a result, large numbers of potential competitors have been dissuaded from entering academe, while those already in it have found their upward mobility blocked by restrictions on promotions and tenure. What is particularly disturbing is that the basic cause of the current crisis appears to be structural in nature: viz., the growing skepticism regarding the economic value of traditional higher education.

Framed in this way, the outlook does indeed appear very bleak. Yet, these same factors, when analyzed from a somewhat different perspective, should forestall any premature conclusions about the meritocracy's imminent demise. For example, the current decline in federal support for research and curriculum innovation may well be reversed by a new Administration, especially one headed by a JFK-style reformer committed to "excellence" and an experimental approach to the solution of social problems. Similarly, proponents of "affirmative action" programs indignantly reject the suggestion that they are trying to destroy meritocratic competition. In their view, quota systems and related devices are merely designed to partially and temporarily suspend the rules of a game which has been unfairly rigged against certain groups. The assumption is that women and members of racial minorities, once assimilated into the competitive
system, will be quite capable of holding their own against their white male counterparts. Over the long term, then, "affirmative action" programs could stimulate rather than enervate the meritocracy.

The unprecedented structural crisis besetting higher education may well have the same invigorating effects, even though it has forced many highly talented graduate students to seek non-academic employment. For those already committed to academe, hard times and nebulous legislative demands for "accountability" have combined to greatly intensify the pressures for achievement. At many institutions, academics are no longer competing for advancement and peer recognition; instead, they are struggling for professional and economic survival. These higher stakes should insure a comparably higher level of performance from most players of the meritocratic game.

NOTES
1. See, Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University* (New York, 1962) for a scholarly account of the development of higher education prior to World War I.
3. As Adam Ulam notes in *The Fall of the American University* (Lasalle, Illinois, 1973), pp. 25-26, research was an important feature of prewar academic life, especially at "Establishment" institutions like Harvard. However, to a great extent, research was "inner-directed," i.e., prompted by intellectual curiosity rather than the desire "... (to) make money or ... to be advanced or retained at a university." Ignoble or not, it was precisely these motives which emerged as dominant in the postwar meritocratic environment.
4. See Robert Nisbet's *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma* (New York, 1971) for a brilliant analysis of the war's impact on academic values.
7. Some observers have argued that, as a group, female academicians are already better prepared for meritocratic competition than the male chairmen and professors who have discriminated against them. For a persuasive, well documented study of academic chauvinism, see Gertrude Ezorsky, "The Fight Over University Women," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. XXI #8 (May 16, 1974), pp. 32-39.