The Academic Community

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introduction

Academic Communities
from the Inside Out

I BEGIN HERE with a few autobiographical remarks, not because I think my life story is particularly remarkable, but rather because we all start from our own idiosyncratic positions and too often those are simply left unacknowledged or are assumed to be transparent. Of course, to foreground and denaturalize them is not the best we can do; it is, in fact, the least we can do if we are going to be responsible contributors to a conversation that involves and also greatly exceeds us. Despite media stereotypes of the absentminded or shy and fumbling professor, we who work in the academy are far from a homogeneous group. Indeed, our passions, career venues, and daily lives have a multiplicity that is often obscured even in our own work concerning our profession, work that too commonly reflects the perspectives of elite university faculty only. Our professional lives are narratives of sorts, and I have long believed that we need to hear about and learn from a far wider spectrum of those narratives. Only by placing narrative against narrative (against narrative against narrative), do we acquire some marginal ability to rewrite, synthesize, or even reject the stories that we have internalized or embraced as the singular truth about professorial life.

Having reached my mid-forties now, I’ve had a relatively successful career at two American institutions whose work I respect immensely. I
have also lived and taught in Africa and Europe, held several administrative posts, and published nine books of various sorts. It has been a varied life involving volunteerism with an array of social service organizations, as well as teaching and writing, with good friends and colleagues, and a relationship with my partner stretching back many years now. I am lucky to be invited occasionally now to lecture abroad and to have professional and social ties across several continents. It is not a particularly unusual life, just a happy one with some lively national and international aspects.

But as I talk with colleagues about professional experiences I have had in Rwanda, Austria, or Finland as a department chair, gay rights activist, and modestly successful writer, the conversation sometimes turns to where I was born and raised, and at that point some of my conversation partners express surprise. I grew up in rural Alabama, went to a very small K-12 school, was the first in my direct family line to go to college, and did so over the objections of my father and despite the indifference of some teachers. There were some wonderful, positive influences that I encountered in Chelsea, Alabama, and at its high school, but also a sort of inertia there and in my extended family that meant that everyone else (almost, before me) got “stuck” (or, more generously, laid down roots) and is today still there, working in a trade (as my father wanted me to do), and living a conservative, religious life with boundaries stretching only as far as the county or state line.

I could write endlessly about why I was absolutely determined to get out of Alabama from a relatively early age. Television in the 1970s was a very big influence, as were movies. I had a few cousins who lived in faraway California, and when they came to visit, with their different accents and points of view, they certainly demonstrated that it was possible to leave and thrive. They and TV provided visual and aural proof of an “outside” to my immediate context, helped denaturalize it, and implied, at least, a position of critique that broadened my life-conversation and complicated those voices that were local and often quite self-satisfied.

However, the activity that performed the function of expansion and denaturalization more consistently than any other was reading. I’ve written before about the dynamic influence in late adolescence of my discovery of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and existentialist philosophy, but years earlier (at age eleven or so) I found I could escape daily into the worlds of science-fiction novels. After I exhausted the meager library
holdings available locally, I joined the “Science Fiction Book Club” at age thirteen and monthly in my rural mailbox appeared books that took me dramatically outside of my context of noisy chicken farms and rumbling coal trucks. Since I didn’t have an allowance and had little way of earning money at that age, these were books that I could buy only by secretly selling to other students the school lunch tickets that my parents bought for me. But the difficulties involved were more than repaid in the hours spent with Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. LeGuin, Robert Heinlein, Samuel Delany, Frank Herbert, and countless others. Sci-Fi provided an imagined “outside” position (far outside, of course) to the dreary inside of rural Alabama and one that played a key role in creating who I have become as an adult. The half dozen years or so that I spent moving from the “inside” of Alabama life to the “outside” of extraterrestrial narratives, and from the “inside” of hours spent in those narratives to the “outside” of my bedroom, house, and community, allowed for shifting and disparate points of critique for all of the “inside” positions involved—novel played against novel, novel against rural Alabama, and television and films were also used to critique both. There were other ways of being and knowing than what I saw around me daily (my later encounters with Sartre, Gide, and Camus were set up well), and from early adolescence I was hell-bent on exploring those other ontologies and epistemologies to the extent that it was possible. (In another book, perhaps, I’ll write a bit about what my chance encounter with a copy of Xaviera Hollander’s *The Happy Hooker* at age fourteen allowed me in imagining a sexual “outside” to the homophobic “inside” of the Bible belt—Hollander may have saved my life given the high suicide rate of lonely, oppressed queer youth in the United States.)

I have spent a few paragraphs writing about this dynamic because it is central to what will follow. Those restless spirals of moving from inside out and from outside in provide the engine of personal, communal, and political change. The local, entrenched, and thoroughly naturalized can only be transformed through some vision of or encounter with an “outside,” even if one returns inevitably to the “inside” of the immediate and mundane. This is a version of what is known as the “hermeneutic circle”—a movement from a circumscribed local positioning to a much broader, even if only imagined, “macro” position, and then back again. A similar dynamic of “inside/out” is key, also, to queer theory of the last two decades, with Diana Fuss’s anthology using that term to point out the
necessary redeployment of what is at hand to move toward a broader or different vision of the future, and using an imagined outside to what is at hand to challenge and change the self-satisfied and parochial. Indeed, my intellectual investment in this dynamic is why I have felt equally at home in my career to date writing about changes in Victorian cultural norms, changes in sexual culture today, changes in our pedagogies, and changes in our academic institutions or behaviors. That inside/out, outside/in dynamic, as complicated and compromised as it always is, is not only my scholarly passion, it is my life's passion.

One result of that intense and ongoing interest was The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual, which I wrote a couple of years ago, and which focused on the individual as the agent of, and object of, change. It was written to counter the rhetoric of victimization that sometimes pervades academic life, rhetoric that suggests that we as graduate students and junior and senior professors, are powerless in the face of broad institutional and professional forces. While there certainly are oppressive situations that demand critique and redress, my point was that unless we also explore the extent to which we are responsible for our own behaviors, attitudes, and life situations, we will often remain complicit with the very hierarchies and norms that oppress us. Change begins at home, in a sense; if we cannot denaturalize our attitudes about our work and professional values, then we will often remain victims and even self-victimizers. A book, a voice from the margins, or an encounter with a different lifestyle or point of view can help provide the fulcrum necessary for first personal and then broader professional change.

Indeed, we always live and work in communities: of family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues in our departments and universities. We may shift our own attitudes supplely and substantially, but unless we commit ourselves also to more than simply self-directed work, what ultimately have we accomplished? I couldn't muster the energy to teach a class, participate in a university committee, or attend a political function if I did not believe that our communities matter far more than our “selves” in their individual or isolated existences. Communal change does not happen quickly, neatly, or linearly, but it does happen all the time, and it is crucial that we continuously explore the extent to which we as individuals have an ability to contribute to contextual change that is thoughtful and in line with our intellectual and political commitments.
While I could focus on any number of larger or smaller communities here, my specific interest will be in those most common aggregates for our professional lives: our departments, colleges, and universities, where change often occurs in ways that we find particularly distressing or oppressive. Indeed, outside forces of change are often the most anxiety-producing of all: the force of imposed budgetary cuts or resource shifts, the effect of political mandates or trustee-level redefinitions, the changes in direction effected by a new university president or college dean. While it is obviously open to discussion whether or not all of these are fully “outside” forces (it depends on how we define “outside,” of course), they certainly are ones that a department, let us say, can be on the receiving end of, and that can feel oppressive. How we respond, however, is always within our control, as upcoming chapters will explore.

That same community, the department, can also change through inside forces and factors. The retirement of a colleague, the hiring of a colleague in a new field or with a different point of view, the tenuring of one individual or the move into administration of another—all of these can result in dramatic changes within the microcosm of an academic unit. I was hired in 1991 into an English department that was dominated by a group of unhappy men (and a few unhappy women) who were antagonistic toward new theories and methodologies and who were scathing in their comments about the shifting demographics of our student population. Junior colleagues were often reduced to tears in department meetings by the vitriol and sarcasm of some of these angry senior professors. Then, the state offered a series of generous retirement packages and nearly a third of the department left within two years. The mood and rhetoric of the department began to shift significantly because the most cynical people simply went away. Previously unimaginable changes in curriculum and hiring priorities became possible because certain people were no longer in the room during department meetings. Who took the retirement deal was something that we untenured professors had no say in, just as we had no say in the “outside” decision to offer the retirement package itself. However, what some of us in the department did with the opportunity afforded by that new climate certainly was within our control.

There are, of course, innumerable professional situations where individuals or groups do have such agency, if they wish to claim it, and all of them reflect the “inside/outside” dynamic that I mentioned earlier. In fact,
what made many of my senior colleagues so miserable was the fact that they had lost—and refused to reclaim—a productive engagement with the larger flow of intellectual and professional conversation outside of their own circle of angry friends. They were isolated from their profession, their students, and their community. Those closed, internally reinforcing circles of resentment and feelings of victimhood are quite the opposite of the expansive and intellectually adventurous circles of professional growth and change that much of this book will discuss. Healthy professional life depends upon an inside/outside dynamic of exploration and engagement with the extralocal with a return then to the local—refreshed, renewed, and reinvigorated. Those excursions can occur at conferences, through reading about a changing discipline or profession, and even in energetic hallway conversations with colleagues.

Yet the possibility of productive change within a department also depends on the inside/outside dynamic of individuals making connections with constituencies and administrators from across campus, and using those outside connections to effect positive changes in their immediate communities. My department changed dramatically because over the course of the next ten years, some of us helped lead it in making over twenty tenure-track hires. We were often given those hires precisely because a few colleagues and I were very adept at talking with deans and university-level administrators; had proven that we would use resources wisely; and had negotiated over how best to reflect the changing priorities of the university, as well as our own interests and commitments. The best colleagues, administrators, and political activists whom I have known have always understood that inside/outside dynamic. Our professional lives are never lived in isolation, and our microcommunities are always only subsets of much larger groups, whose needs and perspectives must be explored and engaged if we are going to maximize our agency and exercise it in responsible ways.

If agency of a sort is almost always possible through those inside/outside dynamics (of consciousness and active engagement), then why, one might ask, do so few individuals and aggregates of individuals work to rethink their professional values and remake their institutions? Change is uncomfortable and nerve-wracking for anyone, but for academics, alone or in groups, embracing change means giving up one of the foundational myths of academic identity: the myth of mastery. To embrace change is to
admit the imperfection of previous ways of being and conducting oneself, and even outright error or misunderstanding. To seek change is to admit humbly that one’s current existence and one’s current set of narratives are outdated or inadequate. To embrace the inside/outside dynamic is to admit the local, limited, and idiosyncratic nature of one’s personal vision and set of answers to complicated questions. For the trained expert, hubristic intellectual, and masterful researcher and teacher, that admission can threaten a core component of a professional, and sometimes personal, life. In fact, for anyone clinging tenaciously to that myth of mastery and self-sufficiency, this book probably will have little value.

My belief is that most of us in the academy—skilled researchers, critical readers of texts, sensitive teachers, and caring colleagues—do not cling with desperate tenacity to our own authority and professional patterns. Oftentimes, we are simply invested in narratives and customs that we have yet to fully interrogate. Indeed, *The Academic Community: A Manual for Change* suggests that even the most tradition-bound and dysfunctional groups have the opportunity to redirect and reinvigorate themselves. Like *The Academic Self*, this book focuses on the individual as the agent of change, though here with an emphasis on working in and with a community of fellow teachers and scholars. Yet even if coalition-building and conversational processes must move well beyond the perspectives and input of the isolated individual, the responsibility for change always begins at the level of the individual professor or administrator. To put it bluntly: no one has more responsibility than you do for making your department, college, or university a better place in which to teach, conduct research, and live a multifaceted professional life. Others—deans, provosts, or presidents—may be paid far more than you are, and may even be explicitly assigned that task of improvement, but if you don’t like certain aspects of your institutional environment, then it is your responsibility to try to do something about it, albeit carefully, responsibly, and in self-protective fashion.

Redirecting my focus for the present project from the “self” as the venue for change to the “community” as its venue means I must shift also some of my theoretical touchstones. *The Academic Self* referenced the work of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, who, in several works from the 1990s, explored today’s unparalleled rhetoric of and potential for self-reflexive work. Giddens usefully, if perhaps overoptimistically,
suggests that we late-modern individuals have given up our traditional narratives—of gender, sexuality, race, and class—and have therefore the potential for remaking ourselves at will and even from the ground up. While Giddens greatly underestimates the force of fundamentalist religious beliefs, the entrenched nature of gender definitions, and (perhaps most glaringly) the different capacities of people from various material circumstances and class backgrounds to afford the luxury of self-refashioning, he nevertheless highlights the potential that does often exist but that also often gets lost in our equally powerful fascination with victimization and blame placing. As I will suggest throughout this book, it is important to hear utopian voices (and I do consider Giddens utopian), use them as motivational devices and interlocutors with our own senses of limitation and sometimes helplessness, and think of them as one tool among many for effecting the changes that we desire.

And it is that emphasis on interplay and multiple voices that brings me to my theoretical touchstone for The Academic Community. I want to spend a few paragraphs here with Hans-Georg Gadamer, the originator of the field of philosophical hermeneutics, and with his notion of dialogue and critical agency. Gadamer, a German academic whose life spanned the twentieth century (he was born in 1900 and died in 2002), has been greatly underutilized to date in cultural studies, and completely ignored in professional studies. Part of this, as Kathleen Wright argues in an essay included in a recent volume of feminist interpretations of Gadamer, is attributable to the fact that his magnum opus, Truth and Method, was published in 1960 but first translated into English in 1975, and was “eclipsed right from the start by the intensity of the discussion about the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida” (Wright 2003, 40). Yet she and most of the other contributors to that volume argue that Gadamer’s work is long overdue for an assessment by cultural critics because of his core belief in dialogue as the lived functional process by which we gain knowledge of ourselves, our limitations, and our necessary ties of respect and responsibility to others in our social and professional lives. Dialogue takes us outside of ourselves and allows us to return to those selves with a broader, altered vision. As I will explore in coming pages, a commitment to dialogue allows us to live a version of a hermeneutic circle.

In theorizing conversation as a way of life, Gadamer proposes that we must always put our “prejudices” or presuppositions at risk in seeking
out others with whom to share ideas, test our notions of reality, and come, through an exchange of viewpoints, to some understanding of our own mistakes and misapprehensions. Risk taking, especially in this way risking our own core beliefs and sense of self-satisfaction, demands a certain conscious, even chosen, privileging of the communal over the selfish or self-serving. In a sense, Gadamer's then is an ethics of engagement with our colleagues, neighbors, and fellow inhabitants of the planet, for as Jean Grondin, his biographer, notes, “As Gadamer often says . . . ‘The soul [of his philosophy] consists in recognizing that perhaps the other is right’” (Philosophy of Gadamer, 100) or as Gadamer himself states in Truth and Method, we must remain “fundamentally open to the possibility that the [other] is better informed than we are” (294). Indeed, Grondin isolates a key distinction in some of Gadamer’s later work wherein the philosopher chastises those whom he calls “pedants” and distinguishes them from true intellectuals whom he values as “cultivated” for their nurtured and honed skepticism about the inviolability of their own opinions. In Gadamer’s words, “The cultured person is the one who is ready to admit as plausible (literally, to value) the thoughts of others. . . . The cultured person is not the one who displays superior knowledge, but only the one who, to take an expression from Socrates, has not forgotten the knowledge of his ignorance” (quoted in Grondin 2003, 25). I am belaboring this point here a bit because Gadamer relates it explicitly to our work in the academy, in a profession devoted to developing “people’s sense of judgment and ability to think for themselves” (Hoffman 2003, 103). As I will explore in a later chapter, Gadamer, in his own life as an academic, demonstrated how dialogue can contribute also to the process of community-building within a university setting.

Though Gadamer coined the term “philosophical hermeneutics,” he drew on a long scholarly tradition. Hermeneutic theory, from early biblical scholars, to Friedrich Schleiermacher in the Romantic era, through Wilhelm Dilthey at the end of the nineteenth century, and up to and including Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and Gadamer in the mid- to late twentieth century has as its common focus textuality, though with a variety of emphases. Gadamer’s hermeneutics urges us to ask, how do we understand the written text, the textuality of phenomenon, and even the text of the self as conversant with the text of the world surrounding the self? Indeed, it is that emphasis on the self as text, always in a larger context,
that allows a useful supplement to our understanding of how change occurs in our professional lives, because what Gadamer in particular does is emphasize the slowness of all change as it occurs within tradition and in negotiation with a variety of other conservative forces. Whereas Giddens posits us as free and posttraditional, Gadamer slows down our expectations even if he never denies the possibility of radical change over time.

The slowness of change can be explained by way of that concept mentioned earlier: the hermeneutic circle. Friedrich Schleiermacher, biblical scholar and the originator of modern hermeneutics, first theorized that we gain understanding of texts through an inside/outside movement, reading a passage in isolation and then placing it in the context of our knowledge or supposition concerning the whole, or larger, text. That continuous movement between the local, or micro, and the larger, or macro, is how we move responsibly through a text, and, in my argument here, how we move responsibly through a personal and professional life. Schleiermacher is rarely referenced today in literary studies because he urged the hermeneut to work toward an understanding of authorial intent, to place oneself in the position of the “originator” of the text. For Schleiermacher, “intent” was the ultimate and determining “macro.” Indeed, this reverence for intent was adopted by a few archconservative literary critics of the twentieth century, such as E. D. Hirsch, who became known for their rejection of new methods and theories. However, phenomenologically based hermeneutic theory (coming from Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others) moved in a different direction, gave up completely any attempt to reconstruct “intent,” and even found little value in those attempts, since we are always reading from our own position and belief systems. Even so, I argue that expressions of intent can themselves be textual. They should be part of what we respond to and work with as we engage in conversations with colleagues and administrators, with communities of students, and with the public. We can “read” intent as critically and productively as we can any other addition to a conversation.

Gadamer and hermeneutic theory offers professional studies some powerful tools. In foregrounding the hermeneutic circle, I will emphasize how our individual needs and desires as members of a community must always operate in negotiation with the macrolevel concerns of our depart-
ments and colleagues. Furthermore, our understanding of the dynamics of our department must always work in tandem with our explorations of the larger needs and priorities of our colleges and universities. And finally, our colleges and universities must operate responsibly with reference to and some understanding of the perspectives of their surrounding communities. That continuous movement from inside to outside and then back again propels responsible change at every level of professional engagement.

And this, Gadamer reminds us, happens most productively by way of a conversational process. We can only move from solipsism to responsible intellectualism by embracing our ties to others, and this means finding ways of engaging others in dialogue. Unlike the dynamic of reading a print text, when we are dealing with the text of our departments and universities, we have the opportunity to solicit responses, to ask for clarifications, and to explore more energetically an “outside” that may lead us to alter the “inside” of our own beliefs and localized interests. While I began this introduction with reflections on my own use of a sort of hermeneutic circle as an adolescent reading science fiction in my bedroom, the similarity with the work I am describing here is far from perfect, of course. Gadamer urges us to talk to others, to listen to them, to learn from their differing perspectives, and then to return to our “selves” with an altered vision. As an adolescent, I had primarily the words on the page (or emanating from the television) to use to alter my understanding. In the academy, we will make a grave mistake if we think we can “read” others’ motives and perspectives from a distance, or if we read only memos, e-mails, or university documents and fail to engage the human beings behind the print. Textualization of the sort I am broadly discussing here, by way of hermeneutic theory, always carries with it the risk of objectification. Objectifying others is what we already tend to do too often; more of the same is not what I am calling for in this book.

Instead, what occurs in conversations that are eagerly joined and that flow from positions that are not self-satisfied is, in Gadamer’s words, a “fusion of horizons.” This is his concept for how differences—temporal, epistemological, cultural, and linguistic—meet and lead to change. It is the meeting of one worldview with another worldview, with those views shifting by way of the encounter. On the most mundane level, it is what happens when I read a novel about a place or person the likes of which or
whom I have never encountered before. I see things differently through that encounter; my horizon of understanding shifts through a fusion with the horizon represented in the text. Cynically one could say that I simply find in the text whatever I need to confirm my own opinions or prejudices (Stanley Fish has made that argument repeatedly), but I believe otherwise. From interactions with students, friends, colleagues, and family, and from my experience of my own metamorphosing beliefs, I know well that people are not static and that their worldviews do change over time through a wide variety of encounters with texts, with people, and with new cultural contexts.

What Gadamer does emphasize, however, is that such change is usually incremental. Indeed, if we expect quick, radical change, we will often be disappointed. And I have a suspicion that it is from those overestimations of the pace of possible change that some cynicism in the academy derives. We can hope for, and even work strenuously for, fundamental—even radical—alterations in our institutions, our communities, and our global ways of being. However, if we expect to see quick results, we are fooling ourselves. As I argued over a decade ago in my first book on Victorian cultural metamorphosis, *Fixing Patriarchy*, change often occurs in ways that are visible only over the course of many decades and more. Gadamer slows down our expectations while never undermining our sense of long-term purpose.

In fact, some of my own purposes here warrant a bit more elaboration. While Schleiermacher would have us attempt to reconstruct authorial intent from afar, here you have an author willing to display his intentions, even if that transparency is never complete and unproblematic. Of course, my readers’ perspectives on what I write will return to me in comments, e-mails, and reviews, and then feed back into my understanding of what I have done and would have done differently with the luxury of a broader vision. In the meantime, however, here is what I intend in the coming pages, and here are some of the specific agendas I am setting out for *The Academic Community: A Manual for Change*.

“Starting with the Self” examines how we conceive of our selves in the academy. The chapter looks at various figures from history and the academy who provide differing models for and enactments of intellectual and academic selfhood: George Eliot (whom I mentioned in *The Academic Self*), Friedrich Nietzsche (whose self-interested iconoclasm
has greatly influenced current work in cultural studies), Paul Ricoeur and Angela Davis (as models of brave and supple teacher/scholars), and, finally, Gadamer (who lived a fulfilling and successful academic life, making positive contributions both to his home institutions and the field of philosophy). All of these figures (and the career models they provide) are discussed with the purpose of judging the effects and responsibility of their contributions to the conversations that surrounded them and that should concern us too.

“Creating Student Intellectuals” explores the community of the classroom and our responsibility as agents of change in our undergraduate students’ lives. In the chapter, I engage in a dialogue with Gerald Graff’s Clueless in Academe to discuss how we can best empower and educate our students to be responsible participants in their own conversations. I supplement Graff’s perspectives with Gadamer’s insistence on the necessary examination of “prejudice” as part of our training of, and work as, intellectuals, and complicate both with the Foucauldian emphasis on the specificity of successful intellectual work. All of these, I suggest, bear not only on what we do in the classroom as teachers, but also on the skill sets and passions that we attempt to nurture in our students for their use throughout their lives. Graff, working with Cathy Birkenstein, offers “templates” for encouraging students to argue their viewpoints; I offer instead prompts that get students to probe where those viewpoints come from.

“Changing Graduate Education” extends the previous discussion to address graduate education specifically. Here, I respond to a number of books already widely cited (including ones by David Damrosch and Bill Readings) to talk about some of the goals we might adopt for our graduate programs. I suggest that we move away from a model of training scholarly monologists, and move toward seeing graduate education as a venue where intellectual conversation is emphasized, and where academics-in-training learn to be community members. As members of intellectual communities, they certainly should learn to conduct research, but they must also learn collegial skills that allow them to participate in their departments, in their classrooms, and in the academic profession as a whole. If we move from the base assumption that we are training monologic scholars to a broader notion of training partners in conversation, we also dramatically broaden how that training effected. And even as we retain as an important goal helping graduate students get jobs in the academy, we do them
an enormous service in training them for the wide variety of roles they will play as academics.

In “Building a Vibrant Department and University Community” I look at the transformational potential of a single department member or administrator who commits herself or himself to building a vibrant community. As in previous chapters, I focus on the energy and intellectual excitement of conversation. I examine the ways conversations can go awry in academic communities, but also how those conversations can be enhanced. The chapter emphasizes practical ways of energizing conversation: research workshops, roundtable presentations, faculty reading groups, and interdisciplinary speakers series and brown-bag discussions. I explore internal and external stressors that threaten departmental and institutional vibrancy and offer concrete examples of how the effects of these stressors can be mitigated.

“Reclaiming the University as a ‘Public Good’” examines the general state of decline in the respect accorded public education in the United States. We have generally seen funding for state universities diminish to the point that formerly “state-funded” institutions are now only “state-assisted” ones. Indeed, education is no longer seen as a public good, only a private responsibility. I explore here ways of reconceiving the roles that universities play in their surrounding communities. They must add value to those communities and not only through vocational training. In fact, the conversations that I discussed in previous chapters should move beyond the physical boundaries of the campus. We must place greater value on public service by faculty members, commit ourselves to making publicly accessible the work that we do as academics, and create forums and venues to offer that work to the public. This demands also a renewed commitment to tenure and the protection of academic freedom, because such publicly visible work is always risky. However, as paid intellectuals (as I will argue throughout the book), such risk taking and broad public engagement should be considered an unquestionable core component of our vocational responsibilities.

The Academic Community concludes with an examination of how we might engage in the work I call for here but still protect our personal lives by setting sustainable goals and boundaries. The chapter discusses how we can arrive at a personal sense of “balance” in our academic lives and avoid bitterness and a sense of defeat. In understanding and accept-
ing the incremental nature of change, even as we motivate ourselves with idealistic goals, we can maintain our commitments, retain our excitement about the conversations in which we participate, and continue to replenish our professional energy. Anything less than this necessarily complex and multilayered awareness is, in fact, unworthy of the intellectual talents we in the academy possess.

As I hope is apparent by now, this is a book animated by an optimism and sincere belief that our academic communities can be sites of transformation, in the lives of students, in our own professional self-conceptions, and in public intellectual life generally. While many of my examples in the coming pages are drawn from the humanities and arts, I hope this book, like *The Academic Self*, will find a much broader readership and contribute to exchanges in the social sciences, the healthcare fields, education departments, and the hard sciences. Similarly, this contribution is from the perspective of a full-time, tenured member of the academy, but I hope it proves useful as we think about how to improve the lives of part-timers, and those not on the tenure track. Our lives in our classrooms, department and professional meetings, and research venues (whether labs or offices) overlap and diverge in ways that I can only imperfectly imagine. This is my addition, from an inevitably and narrowly circumscribed perspective, to a highly dispersed and polyphonic conversation on what we do and who we are as academics. It is an interjection to which I hope to hear pointed and diverse rejoinders.

Indeed, the “academic community,” as I am using the term here, should never be conceived of as a closed or inwardly focused system. The “ivory tower” exists only as a disabling myth. Our communities include overlapping and porously bordered conversational groups of two or three faculty members with similar research interests, students and faculty working in classrooms and on extracurricular projects, cross-disciplinary teams from different parts of campus, department and college administrators, trustees and others who demand accountability and respect for diverse beliefs, and finally the American and global communities in which we all must live our personal and professional lives. Each of these groups has needs and norms that are distinct but that can also overlap in ways that we have yet to fully acknowledge. If we retain our commitment to conversation as an ongoing process, one in which we participate as partners but not as determiners of outcomes, one that may reach temporary points
of suspension but never a terminus or moment of triumph for one participant, then we can minimize not only the risk of burnout but also of our own possible superfluity in contemporary American culture.

If “intellectual” and “academic” have become pejoratives, then we in the academic community must take responsibility for reclaiming them and reasserting their value and the value of the work we do. As effective communicators, supple thinkers, and well-trained teachers, we in the academy have all of the skill sets we need to serve as agents of change. The question remains: will you decide to do that hard work?