Evaluating Faculty Performance during the Information Revolution:
But Is It Scholarship?

Good morning.

This is the first of two sessions that are devoted to faculty evaluation in the age of information technology. I’m going to look at this terrain from relatively high altitude—from a vantage point where we can see the contours of whole institution and their historical evolution. I believe that to understand the forces at work in 2004 we need to go back in time. And to say anything about the future, we do need to understand contemporary social forces. Technology is one of those forces, but only one.

Were I to be doing a PowerPoint presentation—and I rarely do—my first headline would be:

TECHNOLGY DOES NOT MAKE HISOTRY, BUT IT DOES SHAPE THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH MEN AND WOMEN MAKE HISOTRY.

My second headline would be:

WHAT WE EXCPECT OF FACULTY MEMBERS DEPENDS UPON THE GOALS AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE PLACES WHERE THEY WORK, AND THESE GOALS HAVE DIFFERED—AND DO DIFFER—OVER TIME AND SPACE.

And my third headline would be:

WHILE INSTITUTIONAL GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS HAVE, INDEED, CHANGED OVER THE LAST HALF CENTURY, THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION HAS SO FAR BEEN OF ONLY MINOR IMPORTANCE IN AFFECTING THEM.

I know that most of you work in large universities—I spent fourteen years in such places, both private and public. But it is only at small, elite liberal arts colleges that I have occupied a room at the top of the institutional heap, so that is mainly what I am going to talk about today. Although I fully recognize the complexity of American higher
education, I believe observations about these colleges—and the elite private universities which have grown from them—will provide us with some good grist for the mill of a more general discussion.

For one thing, these colleges embody most of the elements at work throughout the academy. For another, their prestige gives them a disproportionate influence over the whole educational establishment. And, of course, their graduates disproportionately occupy positions of power and privilege in our society. It is no accident that this year’s presidential contenders were contemporaries at Yale—though one graduated with C’s and the other with A’s—thus raising again the question of whether ending grade inflation and bringing back C’s would really make America a better place.

All right, back to the subject.

It is revealing to look at small, residential liberal arts colleges over a time period that covers two generations—by my arithmetic, fifty years. Since this is 2004, we first need to go back to 1954 and 1979. Let’s do that. Then we can examine the contemporary scene and wrap up by speculating about what things might be like a generation from now.

Professor Katherine Watson showed up at Wellesley for the 1953-54 academic year—I don’t think she lasted much longer, given her free spirit and romantic inclinations. Now, whatever you think about the plausibility of Julia Roberts holding a PhD from Berkeley or of all the students in Art History 101 having memorized the entire course before the first class—we should all live so long—this solid B-movie does give us a picture of campus like at a women’s college fifty years ago. Add fraternities, athletics and a lot more alcohol, and you will have the male version of the same place.

What was college like back then?

Yes, everyone smoked—in class and out. The sexual revolution had not yet struck. And the age of computation was in its infancy. Good Lord, those of you old enough remember something called carbon paper, remember a time when changing a word meant retyping a page. In our venerable colleges the gas fixtures could still be seen in place, along with the wiring that now brought them electricity. There might be a television in the lounge—but probably not yet. There was one telephone per dorm. College administration was informal and college administrations were tiny by today’s standards. Not only were there no technologists, there were also few lawyers, student life specialists, and security guards. Students expected their rooms to be steaming hot in both winter and summer, and to walk down a cold corridor to the bathroom. There was, in fact, a certain cache to be found in the monastic character of colleges and universities. Those were the days when college presidents spent time smoking their pipes and preparing lectures to the college community on ethics, religion, and politics. Imagine that!

The student bodies of the elite colleges were homogeneously white and, for the most part, drawn from backgrounds of financial privilege, or at least comfort. There were a small number of scholarships for smart kids and good athletes. When these were allocated, that
was that. If you had no money, you almost certainly did not attend Wellesley or Williams or Wesleyan. Perhaps two-thirds of the student body had attended private secondary schools—many students knew each other before coming to college; in any event, they were drawn from similar social circles. People did not travel long distances in those days: college life revolved around social clubs, athletic teams, getting married. Except for the few scholars, the function of college for the majority of students was a coming of age experience—one which culminated in the males being credentialized with a bachelors degree and the women with an MRS as well.

What of the faculty at such places? Except for the women’s colleges and a co-ed university here and there, the faculty were all male. Women were barely allowed into PhD programs and when they did manage to be professionally educated, they rarely found jobs in the professorate. So, we had male professors, usually living on or close to the campus, with their educated wives raising the children and providing the infrastructure for a civilized life. Students did, indeed, come over to the house and sit around the fireplace being lectured to by their pipe-smoking professor, while his wife poured the tea and served the cookies.

Faculty salaries were very low compared with other lines of work. Much of the faculty had independent sources of income from family wealth.

Professor did a lot of teaching—mainly in relatively large lectures. They provided much service. The acted in loco parentis. And—this may puzzle some of the younger members of this audience—in a time when sex was strictly controlled, a great many men ended up marrying their female students.

While a modicum of scholarship was universally expected in the colleges—and a good deal more in the universities—academic success had more to do with fitting in than with publications. There were hardly any formal processes in place for the review of faculty performance. Department chairs—who had often been there forever—deans and presidents made the decisions away from public view. In this sense, the Mona Lisa Smile was right on the mark.

Not only did IT not exist to cause problems in the faculty review process, the process did not exist either! And lest you think I am talking about the pre-Diluvian epoch, let me say that when I was an assistant professor at a famous Ivy League university in the early 1970s, I got reappointed to a second three year term, got promoted, and got to leave for good—all without having to do so much as submit my CV. Of course, in those days, when some mistakenly think there was a meritocracy in place, you had no redress when your time was up.

Cut to 1979. That is actually quite a good year to pick, because most of the forces were now in place that we experience today, though some were still in nascent form—and I am not thinking only of Information Technology when I say that.
The leading colleges and private universities had responded to the massive social transformation of the previous quarter century—including the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the emergence of a service and knowledge based economy in place of one based on manufacturing, the ensuing expansion of higher education and student demand for college admissions—the list is long. Colleges consciously tried to create more diverse students bodies and faculties. What were once a handful of scholarships became “need-blind” admissions. Students were increasingly drawn from across the economic spectrum, from public schools, and from minority communities. The colleges were to be engines of opportunity, training grounds for the future leaders of America. Increasingly, they were also to become centers of high quality research and scholarship.

Their faculties, too, began to include substantially more women and—more slowly—persons of color. With much higher salaries than in 1954, faculty members were able to pursue academic careers without possessing personal wealth. Professors increasingly were drawn from two-career families and shared child care responsibilities with their spouses. Living on or near the campus became more problematic as households made rational locational decisions in regional labor markets. The faculty was replaced by professional specialists in student affairs and other aspects of college life and management. The expectations for research and scholarly publication started to ratchet up at both the colleges and universities.

College life for students was far freer and more outward looking than it had been in 1954. Nearly all colleges had become co-ed and official restrictions on sexual behavior virtually eliminated. The curriculum became an expansive terrain where students were given a great freedom of choice. Work in the community became a part of the educational experience. The idea of a junior year abroad started to sweep the country. And athletics became much more important—both in terms of college resources being devoted to it and in terms of the percentage of student bodies playing intercollegiate sports.

For college leaders, the great issues were how to both increase diversity through affirmative action and financial expenditure and how then to manage the consequences of diversity on college campuses, whether in teaching and learning or in group relations. To no small extent, the urban conflicts of the previous decades moved onto college campuses. College presidents became the new mayors of increasingly integrated communities.

In this context—and I have not even mentioned the increasing tangle of law and litigation in which colleges found themselves—in this context the review processes for faculty appointment, tenure, and promotion became fully established. As you all know, it has rested on the three pillars of teaching, scholarship, and service. The role of the professor at the leading liberal arts colleges was clearly defined as that of the teacher-scholar, with service mainly through participation in faculty governance forming a lesser, but necessary, third dimension. Teaching expectations remained high, while the bar in scholarly productivity was raised closer to that of elite universities.
Now it is important to note that by this time—remember our year is 1979—the revolution in educational technology was mainly a gleam in the eyes of wanna-be billionaires. As I recall, hardwired word processors were making their way into administrative offices, the Xerox machine was ubiquitous—this was the epoch of cut, paste and photocopy. Yes, there was some distributed computing using mainframes. But new possibilities of production for written work were just being felt, while the assault of the visual remained a decade away.

I know exactly when I first bought a desktop computer for home and started using a word-processing program. It was 1982 and the computer was an Apple IIe. It has a memory of 50K—capable of storing about 15 pages of text. Technology was reshaping the world, all right, and great breakthroughs were being made in the sciences. Yet as of 1979 the lives of students and faculty outside of the laboratory sciences were little affected by it.

This is not to say that there were no issues in faculty performance reviews. There were. And like the other points of conflict and tension in the college of 1979, they remain with us today. Let me list just a few.

**Original scholarship.** First, there was the question of whether material under review is really scholarship—and this is even leaving aside how to evaluate work in the creative and performing arts. More than once I have heard faculty members ask, “*But is this scholarship?*” Now, the “this” to which they were referring might have been a textbook, or a series of articles in a popular magazine, or public addresses; or maybe it was a report to a U.N. commission, or a marketing study for a private client. Since the “this” had to go somewhere in the review process, the issue of classification was always intertwined with the issue of scholarship, as in: “Jones has produced a first-rate piece of journalism. Let’s put these articles under ‘service.’”

It turns out that no faint praise is more damning than to refer to work as “excellent journalism.” If no holds are barred, the work might even be called “mere journalism.” I do not expect that there are many journalists out there in this audience, but you can see where this all ends up 25 years later—right now: to “mere journalism” has been added the sobriquet “just software.”

**Time management and productivity.** A second issue that invariably arose was how the colleague had allocated his or her time and energy during the review period. Review committees wanted to see effort, but even more, they wanted to see results. Mr. Casaubon spent a lifetime working on a classical concordance that never came to fruition. He would not have gotten tenure at Connecticut College in 1979. Similarly, faculty members who put years of time into the “infrastructure” they deemed necessary prior to publication—whether this infrastructure involved dwelling on Peruvian mountain tops, or building by hand the world’s largest artificial flume, or learning Finnish—such colleagues always ran the risk of their reviewers saying “where’s the meat?”
Necessary and sufficient performance. A third issue in my short and abstracted list revolved around the weighting to be given to the three criteria of teaching, scholarship and service.” Here the concern of reviewers was with the relative importance of the criteria themselves. Did everyone have to reach a minimum on each criterion? Should an institution promote a colleague who was a superb scholar but inadequate teacher? (The answer was nearly always NO at a liberal arts college and often YES at research universities.)

I can hear the voices now: “Shouldn’t all of the work that Jennifer did in devising a whole new curriculum for Athletic Religious Studies count as teaching, or couldn’t some of it count as scholarship, since Jennifer seems to have excess service credit?” “How could anyone in the physics department have conducted their research if Sally had not, by herself, constructed a small cyclotron—this after the administration refused the department the funds to buy one. Shouldn’t Sally’s service compensate for her lack of scholarly productivity in view of the fact that she facilitated the research of colleagues?” Again, we come back to the questions of how work is to be classified and how productivity is to be measured.

Do all of these and many more related quandaries sound familiar? They should. For they are all with us today in the age of information technology and they can all be applied directly to questions about scholarship, teaching, and service for faculty members deeply engaged in IT.

Segue to 2004. (I never even heard of that word in 1979.) The technical revolution is in full swing. We are everywhere wired and wireless. The possibilities of pedagogy have greatly expanded. A language class in Colorado can work on a project with native speakers in Cologne or Krakow or Canton. The monuments in Art History 101 can now be viewed and analyzed and incorporated into papers and presentations to an extent not dreamed of by that gorgeous professor in the Mona Lisa Smile. You are the last group of people who need to be told or shown how far educational technology has come in empowering liberal education. Surely, we can see that technology in the academy has, indeed, helped to shape the conditions under which men and women make history.

But, I would argue, it has not yet transformed those conditions. The issues that we could see at various stages of fruition 1979 with regard to the fragmentation and multiple demands placed on faculty, the great importance of non-curricular activities in the lives of students, the great difficulty of building genuinely pluralistic multi-cultural college campuses—the issues of coherence and unity in an increasingly fragmented culture—all of these issues continue. The effect of IT is not fundamental to defining the outcomes of these issues or to establishing the goals of academic leadership.

Now fasten your seatbelts—I also believe (1) that the judgment calls in faculty review processes have changed little from 1979, (2) that faculty members who are IT leaders do not suffer unduly from their involvement with technology, and (3) that faculty review processes have no more effect now than they have ever had in inhibiting technical innovation.
A few minutes ago I argued that the contemporary system of tenure review was fully developed by 1979—when the information revolution was in its infancy. The only real change I see in the last quarter century is an increased emphasis on scholarly productivity in the liberal arts colleges, and with it the need for faculty members to lead more pressured and fragmented lives. I have serious concerns about this trend. I think we need to create a new coherence in the lives of faculty members and students. But, frankly, I do not see IT as being anything more than a minor causal player right now in giving junior faculty the jitters before tenure reviews or in shaping the work of senior faculty.

This is not to say that there are no horror stories out there or questions about whether software development should be credited as scholarship or service. The point is that these are the same old questions that have been dominant for at least a generation—the questions I outlined: questions of the originality and importance of scholarship, questions of time management and productivity, questions about how where to set the bar for the criteria of teaching, scholarship and service.

Can a faculty member suffer in a performance review for devoting too much time and energy to an IT project which is deemed unimportant or unoriginal or simply of insufficient quality to be worthy of much credit? Of course? Can a faculty member spend too much time on service related to IT? Of course. The truth is that IT is just another element in the environment that can divert a colleague from the task at hand. In this sense, it is just like buying a house or deciding you need to attend every conference in your discipline. I know plenty of colleagues who have gotten into trouble on performance reviews because they were unable to manage their time and priorities.

The information revolution is changing the environment of colleges and universities so that IT work can be better and more fairly evaluated. Remember, however, that fairly evaluated does not mean positively evaluated or given the value that a colleague might believe that it deserves. Professional organizations like the Modern Language Association, the American Historical Association, the American Political Science Association, and many others have developed criteria and guidelines to assist review committees. Project Merlot and like efforts are advancing to facilitate peer review of IT work.

The disciplines themselves are evolving, as they always have, to make use of the new technology, to adapt themselves to scholarly productivity that does not fit neatly into the old packages of the monograph and journal article. Before I left Vassar in 2001 I helped get a media studies program launched; when I came to Connecticut College in that same year, I found the fully developed Ammerman Center for the Arts and Technology. Similar enterprises now abound in our colleges and universities. The faculty members associated with such places and doing the kind of work they foster are not only being reviewed for tenure and promotion, they are doing the reviewing.

Those of us who are managing academic enterprises are part of the information revolution and recognize its educational importance. With the help of the Andrew W.
Mellon Foundation, liberal arts colleges across the country have been working with one another to support educational technology on their campuses and the work of their faculty members. The National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education—NITLE—now encompasses about 80 colleges, and its members will soon reach 100 institutions from coast to coast. Perhaps there was a difficult period for some innovative faculty a decade or so ago. But today, I would argue, there are few presidents or deans who do not recognize the validity of IT work and its importance in the life of their institution.

I am about to wrap up and give you plenty of time to take exception with my argument. I will say that for me and many other presidents our main worry about IT is the endless cost of the thing and the endlessly rising—and clearly market driven—expectations of each new cohort of our students.

It is, of course, possible that where you stand on these matters does depend on where you sit in our organizations.

A generation from now, will someone like me be saying the same thing. Will they look back on 75 years and say, well, there were big changes between 1954 and 1979, but technology wasn’t really the cause. Or will they say that I could not see the forest for the trees—assuming both forests and trees exist in 2029.

If they say the latter, I suspect it will be because of three areas of change which will dramatically accelerate in the next quarter century. I am going to just outline what might happen.

First, there may be a revolution in the system of publication and vetting of scholarly work. We see the outlines already in electronic journals and peer review processes that are dissociated from the medium of dissemination, whether the journal article or the book.

Second, the article and the monograph may be disassembled in such a way that the receiver of information plays an active part in the way that information is accessed and interpreted. What is now still limited—and do correct me if I am wrong—what is now still limited to hypertext novels and interactive games may be the first waves of an ocean storm that will transform the character of what we mean by research and scholarship.

Third, and equally radical, is the possibility that the division of labor in the academy will change dramatically. Technology may “unpack” the professor as it is already “unpacking” the librarian and the reassembled parts may create an entirely different set of professional roles and performance expectations. (Who knows, some of you are mumbling—even college presidents might get unpacked and reassembled.)

I, myself, would bet against any of this. I would bet that economic and political forces will be far the stronger elements in shaping the colleges and universities of the future.

What do you think?