

AFTER THE ACADEMY:  
*Memories of Teaching and Learning in the Land of Lincoln*

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P O S T S C R I P T

*In Academia as Well,*  
**What's Past  
is Prologue**

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*b y* A L D E M A R O R O M E R O

Institutions of higher education in the U.S. are often not very good at recording their own histories. With the exception of a handful of venerable ones, comprehensive narratives about colleges and universities histories are virtually non-existent.

This is somewhat surprising given that, for tenure and other reasons, the workforce which operates in those institutions tends to be rather stable throughout the years. They represent the heart of the institution. The story—probably apocryphal—is told that when Dwight Eisenhower became president of Columbia University in 1948, he was introduced to a lot of distinguished faculty members during his first days in office. When he asked why he was being introduced to those people instead of touring the facilities on campus, the person setting up his agenda told him “because faculty **are** the university.”<sup>1</sup>

That story reflects the belief that students and administrators may come and go but faculty, for the most part, stay and do not simply work at a university, but actually constitute it.

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<sup>1</sup> Although this is a sometimes-repeated story, neither researchers at the Eisenhower Library nor the authoritative *Eisenhower at Columbia* by Travis Jacobs (Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, 2001), provide any substantiation to it.

The idea behind the collections of stories in this current book came after the publication of a previous book, *Adventures in the Academy*<sup>2</sup>, a year ago. That volume was a collection written by faculty members of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) in which they described their experiences in both the classroom and the field, in the U.S. and abroad. So the next question was logical: how did we get here after more than 50 years of history at SIUE?

Historians know that there is nothing better than primary sources, whether written documents or oral histories, to help us in our attempts to understand past events. The problem with the written record is that many documents in academia tend to be very administrative in nature and are discarded after a certain number of years; however, narrative accounts of previous faculty members may provide a first-hand look into a history that would otherwise be lost.

For this volume, we approached distinguished emeriti faculty and alumni and asked them to share their stories with us. In some cases, those stories needed to be told through an interview, a creative piece, or through writing not by them but about them. The stories of those who graduated from this institution years ago, when this was a smaller and a commuter campus, were also quite compelling. Both narratives together complement each other and give us a wonderful look at memories of teaching and learning in this evolving university.

After reading all those accounts, one comes to the conclusion that this institution has changed a lot during its first fifty years. Its own evolution and success has been the result of the work of dedicated people, but also of adaptation to new ideas, the kind of students we serve, the types of contributions we are making to the community in which we live, and the way internal resources have been managed.

The title of this postscript paraphrases one of Shakespeare's passages in *The Tempest*, but as with many of Shakespeare's phrases,

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<sup>2</sup> LaFond, L., C. Berger & A. Romero (Eds.). 2010. *Adventures in the Academy: Professors in the Land of Lincoln and Beyond*. Edwardsville: College of Arts and Sciences, SIUE.

the deep meaning and meanings contained within this phrase reach beyond his own time.

We could say that we cannot escape our own past, that some traditions are to be kept, that certain values are never to be modified. Yet, we know that the world is changing quickly and the rate of change is accelerating, not only from a technological viewpoint but also from a cultural one. Examples that directly affect higher education abound: less financial support from state governments, more resistance to increases in tuition and fees in trying to remedy budgetary shortfalls, changes in attitudes and preparation among students coming from high schools, higher levels of diversity in the student body, greater demand for accountability regarding what we do; increasing pressure for higher graduation rates rather than just higher enrollment numbers; the list could go on and on.

So the question is, can we not only survive those challenges but also thrive in new environments, in a world that is more competitive, global, and which holds fewer available resources?

To that end, we need to look at what past generations of university members did to get us where we are today. Although some tactics and approaches must change in different times, certain strategies and practices should not be that different: commitment to excellent, imagination and creativity when confronting new problems, maintaining the sense that we are working not for ourselves but for the public good, and believing that there is no higher reward than to see our students succeed, not simply because of facts they learned while in college, but because of the way we taught them how to think.

If our own history has taught us anything, it is that those individuals who have succeeded have done so not because of simple luck but because of their talents, perseverance, and sheer commitment to being good at what they do. And that is what a liberal arts education is all about: helping individuals, regardless of their background, to discover what their talents are and how to use them best for the benefit of society.