

# Professor STORIES

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## RAH RAH, BLAH BLAH

What's important in a university? Certainly, what everybody knows is important is important. The library, the students, the endowments, and the capital value are all indicators of what's important. Also, the professors, the alumni, what's invented, and what's discovered tell somebody what the university is capable of accomplishing. And, of course, there are even those who attempt to figure out what the university stands for, and, indeed, there are even those who believe that's most important.

As nearly everything can be misunderstood, what's important to the university also gets misunderstood. One of the biggest misunderstandings is when the symbols of what's important are mistaken for the important characteristics themselves. For example, old trees, immaculate lawns, and an ivy-covered Old Main are in and of themselves irrelevant to a good or poor education. Nevertheless, such a picture usually symbolizes a college that's been around for a long time, and, all things being equal, those around a long time offer more to the serious student than those recently built at once by a state's legislature. But it isn't the tall trees and the green grass, and it isn't even the traditions that are the necessary components of a good school. There are good colleges and universities without any grass other than those skinny margins of city sidewalks. And there are schools that demand nothing of the students and give nothing in return. But these schools are camouflaged so as to fool everyone—students and faculty

alike—into believing that they're real schools. Their oldness, and trees and tradition have been substituted for teaching and dedication to learning.

Yes, there's no doubt that, in a generation, new schools are unable to develop the "look" of age and virtues associated with stability, but there is also no doubt that old schools fall on hard times. On the other hand, there is no doubt that some of the truly important elements of a university can be upgraded in a generation—library, students, endowment, capital value—but other elements usually require at least fivefold the time and the luck to become truly distinguished—professors, alumni, and mission. That's exactly why the state can create a great physical plant in a decade and even pack it with good students, good books, and good laboratories, but the school may remain for decades no more than just a state university that accommodates the less affluent or less able student.

Society tries to figure out what's important in the university and is often misled by those entrusted by the university to camouflage the true situation. A young professor attempts to figure out what is important, and he too is often misled. When Ray Baxter joined the faculty of the State University, he felt that he would never again be any happier or more fulfilled. He was back home to his alma mater, to the school that nurtured him from adolescence through early manhood. Who said one couldn't return home? Ray had, and now he would make a permanent life for himself here. What made it so easy for Ray was that he knew everything there was to be known about State University. More than the buildings, the visible traditions, and the people themselves, Ray knew what the university stood for, what it aspired to become, how it behaved. There were times for the old rah, rah, such as the

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games, the commencements, and the celebrations. And there were times when one needed to affect the blahs. And it was Ray's gift to have achieved both traits early on. No one gave it the old school try with more noise and nerve than Ray. And no one could put on that almost indescribably bored and indifferent academic pose better than Ray when the situation demanded.

But like autumn's golden trees and emerald green grass, like the size of the library and endowments, Ray mistook the symbols for what they represented. He was someone who knew everything about his university, even down to when to put on the old rah, rah and when to give it the bored blah, blah. Possibly that's why, when he wasn't promoted or tenured, everyone seemed surprised, but no one protested. Although there was hardly a professor or student around who would have predicted that Ray would fail at the university, there were even fewer who thought an injustice had been perpetrated. And although no one actually said it this way, had they thought about it they might have concluded that Ray had the manners of the university, but actually learned almost nothing about what it did and why. That may be why even bright alumni can fail as professors. Sure, one can go home, but home for the adult is never like it was for the child. To go home successfully is to remember that not only have you changed but your home and everyone there have not remained frozen while you were growing up. And it's to remember also that the world you knew then was, if not a child's world, an incompletely understood world. That's why it could be said that, if Ray Baxter knew everything about his university, he knew nothing about his university. ●

## GETTING AHEAD

Is life the liquid that goes into the container, or is its most serious purpose to shape the container? Are there givens that life must accommodate in order to survive, or does one's life itself determine all givens except the life itself? Of course, those of us who engage in the ancient nature-nurture argument know all there is to know about that problem, except what we don't want to know. And, of course, the fatalists know all of the answers but none of the questions. And the Pope and the chief Rabbi know all of the questions but none of the answers. So, of course, it's a rhetorical question we ask—not in the sense that everyone knows the answers but that no one knows the answers.

There was once a young man who, upon completion of his PhD in American history, accepted a position at one of our great universities. He had all of the credentials to be an outstanding professor. He earned a brilliant undergraduate record and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year. His doctoral dissertation was approved with distinction. His major professor was thought to be one of the three or four great historians in the country. Our young man was a nice guy who had a nice wife, and a nice baby, and a nice religion, and nice skin, and a nice income, and they all lived in a nice neighborhood, and had nice neighbors and nice friends, and everybody said he had a nice future. So, of course, he rose through the ranks, attaining associate professor status after his fourth year, and full professor status after his ninth year, all on schedule and without a single hitch. But once he became a full professor, he wondered why he needed to write anymore and study as much as he had studied. After all, he knew from the beginning that the major reason why *he* published was to be promoted. Never for a moment did he believe that most professors willingly—eagerly—wrote because they loved to write and were promoted because they published. He knew better than everyone else that practically every professor who spoke as if he loved to write and study spoke lies. He knew that was true because he also knew he was a master at spreading the lie.

What was he to do? Our now middle-aged, distinguished teacher decided he must find a new challenge, and where else should he look but in higher education administration. First, he applied for and succeeded in gaining the chairmanship of the history department. But after a few years, that became a boring job (nowhere did we say that this man was either stupid or lazy). So, when the venerable Dean Hobart Jones announced his retirement, he next sought the deanship of his school. In that contest, he was unanimously elected dean of the college, but being a nice guy, having a brilliant undergraduate record, having published enough to be a full professor, all of those accomplishments and more were not enough. This man was simply a lousy dean. And to make matters worse, the college didn't find him out until it was too late. By the time the college discovered its mistake, and by the time he knew they couldn't be fooled any longer, he had stopped writing, stopped teaching, stopped thinking like a professor, and even stopped being a nice guy. And when the chips were down, he learned something he had never known before—that it's the professors who in the last instance own the university. And for a professor, the only way to truly get ahead is to work at being a better professor. Everything else is incidental or trivial or, at the most, temporary. ●