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ABSTRACT

In "Working-Class Women in the Academy," Laura Weaver explains how her working class background affected the attitudes she developed toward members and the elements of the middle-class academy. Weaver says she considers education a privilege, something that must be earned. She holds a particular empathy for working-class students who know that education is not something they can take for granted. Her experience has sensitized her to the importance that members of the academy attach to socioeconomic and educational background. For scholars specializing in communication studies, the sense of conflict in the academy is strong. Michelle Tokarcyk and Elizabeth Fay, editors of "Working-Class Women in the Academy," contend that institutional values become discriminatory when they require working-class women to assume a hefty financial burden and maintain a facade of financial well being. Tokarcyk recounts several personal stories about anxiety: anxiety about graduate school expenses, the job search, and an empty refrigerator. After struggling to complete her education, Tokarcyk found it doubly difficult to meet living expenses because she had monthly loan payments to make. During her job-hunting days, Tokarcyk had to apply for food stamps to defray the costs of dressing for success and interviewing for positions. These women face a crisis in community. In order to become part of the academy, they are asked to shoulder unreasonable financial burdens and at the same time to reject a value system with which they grew up. (TB)

Crisis in Community

Conflicting Values, Competing Voices

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by

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Crisis in Community:

Conflicting Values, Competing Voices

Ruth Lewis and Ed Swingle were two members of the Academy who shared my sense of community. I first met Ruth in the fall of 1983, during my first semester as a graduate student in communication at The University of Akron. I can remember telling Ruth that I decided to abandon my high school teaching career and my counseling studies to specialize in an area I thought I understood best: communication. She knew what I meant when I said that no amount of counseling could boost a displaced homemaker's self esteem better than a successful job interview or a firm job offer. She recognized the conflict I experienced when I wondered why we concentrated on writing journal articles instead of teaching interviewing skills. She listened to me when I said, "We know so much and we do so little."

Ed Swingle listened to me, too. Five years after my conversations began with Ruth, I started a new round of talks with Ed. He coordinated the speech program at

a branch campus of Kent State University. One day, he asked me how it felt to be a part-time faculty member. Ed was the first tenured faculty member to ask that question. I didn't know if I should reply honestly or diplomatically. I was surprised when I heard myself telling the truth, "It feels lousy," I said.

I was even more surprised when I heard Ed respond, "You know, I've never been able to understand how an institution of higher learning can justify treating part-time faculty members like second-class citizens." So began another continuing series of conversations about community.

I miss those conversations with Ruth, who died in 1992, and Ed, who died earlier this year. I loved listening to them tell stories about their misadventures in the academy. Because the works I read for this project reminded me of those stories, I would like to dedicate this presentation to Ed and Ruth. I hope to continue our conversations today by telling stories about people who have been willing to share their sense of community with others. I have never met any of these people, but, thanks to Ruth and Ed, I feel as though I have always known them.

Laura Weaver, who tells her story in Working-Class Women in the Academy, is one of those people. Weaver grew up in a Mennonite community. Unlike her neighbors, she was a member of a working class family. Her father lost his inheritance, the family farm, after he argued with her grandfather about planting tobacco. Weaver's father thought cultivation of tobacco was immoral, while her grandfather viewed it as practical. The grandfather overruled his son's objections and Weaver's father left the farm and his family. Although he made periodic visits and offered some financial support, Weaver's family managed without him. She, her mother, and her sister supported themselves by doing other people's laundry, cleaning, sewing, and yard work.

As Weaver notes, her working class background affected the attitudes she developed toward members and elements of the middle-class Academy. Weaver said she

considers education a privilege, something that must be earned. She holds a particular empathy for working-class students who know that education is not something they can take for granted. They struggle to meet their college expenses. Weaver also values all types of work and the people who perform it. She resents the condescending language, such as "hired hand" and "help," that are often used to describe individuals who perform manual labor.

Weaver's experiences in a middle-class world have sensitized her to the importance members of the Academy attach to socioeconomic and educational background. Her experiences mirror those of Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth Fay. The editors of Working-class Women in the Academy contend that institutional values become discriminatory when they require working-class women to assume a hefty financial burden and maintain a facade of financial well being. According to Tokarcyk and Fay, those financial worries are compounded when women with low-prestige degrees from public universities enter the academic marketplace. Because all universities want to perpetuate an image of a quality tradition, they actively recruit graduates of Ivy

League schools. Women with degrees from public institutions are at a competitive disadvantage.

Noting that her socioeconomic background denied her the privilege of a "quality education at a quality school," Tokarcyk recounts several personal stories about anxiety: anxiety about graduate school expenses, the job search, and an empty refrigerator. During graduate school, she found it difficult to meet living expenses, so she supplemented her stipend with student loans. After struggling to complete her education, Tokarcyk found it doubly difficult to meet living expenses because she had monthly loan payments to make. During her job-hunting days, Tokarcyk had to apply for food stamps to defray the costs of dressing for success and interviewing for positions.

Tokarcyk says that her job-hunting failure triggered fears of permanent unemployment and impoverishment. She recalled the panic she felt during an electrical blackout in 1977. She wasn't afraid of the darkness, but she was frightened by the prospect of no food. Tokarcyk was worried that what little food she did have in her refrigerator might spoil. Although power was restored before her food supply was ruined,

Tokarcyk faced another crisis that threatened to deplete her food budget. She remembers the total lack of control she felt when her food stamps were late in arriving. When she called authorities, they told her they could not provide any immediate assistance. Tokarcyk's financial situation would not permit a quick trip to the grocery, either. Knowing that she would have to sustain herself on peanut butter and water for an entire weekend, Tokarcyk threw the telephone receiver at a wall.

Fay chronicles the stories of women who are the only members of their families and sometimes their entire neighborhoods to receive college degrees. When these working-class women enter graduate school, they are asked to abandon all involvement in community activities in order to assume new identities in the academic community. They undergo a rite of passage that requires them to deny their working class roots and embrace the values of the intellectual elite. Fay noted that she experienced guilt when she refused to participate in fund-raisers, church functions, and other activities that comprised her former self definition. Instead, she struggled to incorporate a

professional identity into her new sense of self. She suffered the costs of the isolation required by the demands of the academic community. In order to write and study, Fay severed ties with family, friends, and other members of her working-class community.

Women like Fay, Tokarcyk, and Weaver experienced a similar crisis in community. In order to become professional members of the Academy, they were asked to reject their values. When they responded to voices from within the academy, they ignored voices from within their communities. When they heard the term "academic community," they sensed a contradiction in terms. They, like Weaver, were asked to focus on individual achievement instead of community development. They, like were asked to abandon their way of knowing. Their institutions and their disciplines asked them to adopt a new, uncomfortable way of knowing that offered them little sense of direction. Their experiences and research suggest that a genuine spirit of community within the Academy might evolve from a serious re-examination of the institutional way of knowing.

Of the many stories chronicled in Working-class

Women in the Academy, Saundra Gardner's is the one that offers the most fitting conclusion to this convention presentation. In her narrative, Saundra tries to answer the question, "What's a nice working-class girl like you doing in a place like this?" It was a question her mother often asked and Saundra often had trouble answering. She uses the following anecdote to demonstrate her difficulty.

One day, while visiting her mother, Saundra noted that she planned to attend a conference on the West Coast. When her mother asked her why people attended conferences, Saundra said they attended because they wanted to present and discuss ideas. Then, her mother asked if she knew many people who would be attending. Saundra told her mother that she only knew a few of the hundreds of people who would be there.

After listening to Saundra's reply, her mother looked puzzled. Clearly, she was not impressed by her daughter's plans. Instead of congratulating Saundra, her mother simply asked, "You mean to tell me that you are going to travel 3,000 miles to talk to people you don't even know?"

Meekly, Saundra replied, "Yes."

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