



Community and Purpose in the Academy

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Abstract

References to “the academic community” abound in higher-education discourse, yet the concept itself is rarely examined. This paper argues that academic community is not only an empirical phenomenon but a normative ideal essential to the moral, intellectual, and institutional purposes of higher education. Contemporary universities, however, increasingly undermine the conditions for such community through organizational professionalism, individualism, managerialism, retreat from academic citizenship, and troubled collegiality. Drawing on sociological and normative theories of community, the paper distinguishes between descriptive accounts of academic networks and a richer, value-laden conception grounded in shared purposes, intellectual virtues, and relational practices. A value-theoretical analysis shows that academic community is instrumentally, constitutively, and intrinsically connected to core academic values such as knowledge, understanding, learning, and justice, and that it contributes to human flourishing. Substantive examples from social epistemology, pedagogy, and academic debates illustrate how academic values depend on communal norms and practices. The paper argues that revitalizing academic community requires both structural reforms—reducing competitive managerial pressures and rebalancing professional reward systems—and cultural renewal grounded in generosity, shared identity, and collective responsibility. Drawing on relational moral theory, it is further argued that academic community possesses moral significance beyond its connection with academic values, as identity and solidarity generate collegial obligations central to professional life. The paper concludes that unless universities cultivate conditions in which genuine academic community can flourish, they will continue to erode the very values that justify their existence.

Keywords Academic community · Academic values · Professionalism · Collegiality · Academic citizenship · Managerialism · Higher education · Universities

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Introduction

References to the academic community are common, but rarely problematized. Is there such a thing as “the” academic community? Do academics form various communities within their institutions and across institutions within disciplines? How should the concept of community be understood in these contexts? If a community is a group of people who interact regularly over time in mutually supportive ways, motivated by a shared sense of purpose, values, or identity, how do academics display and enact these characteristics? What is their sense of a shared purpose, values, and identity? How does that sense of a shared purpose fit how various university stakeholders expect academics to serve public and private interests? What happens to “the academic community” when there is a mismatch between academics’ sense of identity and stakeholder expectations?

Universities have been characterized by fragmentation and loss of legitimizing purpose since the 1990’s, combined with increased commodification of university activities and managerialism in university administration. In the “postmodern university”, substantive purposes like education, knowledge, and understanding have been replaced by the formal goal of “excellence” (Readings 1996). Public purposes have been overshadowed by private interests. Higher education is seen as a consumer good and research as an investment for developing marketable products. Accountability measures are seen as necessary to assure anxious stakeholders that universities, and by extension “the academic community”, is fully focused on serving these interests (Strathern 2000).

This managerial turn has generated unease among academics, accompanied by nostalgia for times when universities were supposedly cohesive communities with an unquestioned common purpose and freedom to pursue it in accordance with their considered values. While such a golden age may never have existed, its image stands in stark contrast to the disjointed realities of many contemporary institutions (Fleming 2021). It is therefore not surprising that commentators have called for a renewed sense of purpose for universities (Barnett 2013, 2017; Collini 2012; Fitzpatrick 2021; Kristinsson 2023; Miller 2019; Nixon 2011; Shapiro 2005). Many candidates for such a purpose have been suggested, but none will be effective unless it is supported by an academic culture with a genuine sense of community around purposes specific to university life.

This paper maintains that academic community is essential to the moral, intellectual, and institutional purposes of higher education, while also increasingly undermined by managerial and individualistic forces that must be resisted through structural and cultural renewal. The focus is put on academic community by asking what it is, how it is threatened, why it must be defended against these threats, and how it can be cultivated. The text is divided into four main sections. The first argues that while descriptive analyses are useful, there is an urgent need for a normative approach with the potential to inspire change. The second section explains how academic community is threatened by organizational professionalism, individualism, managerialism, retreat from academic citizenship, and troubled collegiality. To show why it must be defended against these threats, the third section employs value-theoretical analysis and a series of substantive examples to argue that academic values, which should provide universities with their *raison d’être*, depend on academic community, and then adds an argument for the moral value of academic community. The fourth and final section argues that academic culture, enmeshed as it is in complex power dynamics, needs an

inspiring vision that views academic community as crucial for its contribution to academic values and for its moral significance.

What is Academic Community?

The term ‘academic community’ can refer to either an existing social reality or an aspiration. The associated concepts are different because they serve different purposes; one is descriptive, the other normative. This section clarifies this difference to pave the way for a closer examination of the normative concept.

The Descriptive Concept

The descriptive concept of community is sociological. Its purpose is to describe and analyze social reality and not to appraise or argue for an ideal. When defined geographically, it applies to people who interact and form networks due to physical proximity. Non-geographically it applies to a social relationship based on shared values, mutual obligations, and regular interactions, and to people connected by a shared identity, interest or condition. Sociologists have also highlighted the subjective experience of community, a feeling of belonging, solidarity, and shared purpose. The sociological meaning of community has expanded from classical theories focusing on place, tradition, and solidarity (Tönnies 1887/2001; Durkheim 1893/2014) to contemporary approaches emphasizing networks, identity, and virtual connections (McMillan and Chavis 1986; Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000; Rainie and Wellman 2012). Although sociological theories may refer to ideal types in their explanations of social behavior, their purpose is to help us understand the existing and evolving social world rather than to make explicit value judgments.

From this descriptive point of view, an *academic* community is a complex social reality involving institutions, roles, and networks. It intersects with university communities that comprise diverse groups of people who interact and form networks within a university campus: students, academic workers, administrators, and support staff. Academic communities are distinguished by their shared values and identities. The term ‘academic’ indicates that members value learning and identify as knowledge-seekers; these shared values may serve as a source of solidarity and organic division of labor among them. An academic community can also be shaped by a common bureaucratic and competitive structure, such as university administration or research funds, or a fluid global and digital network formed around academic interests and activities. Individuals thus belong to academic communities in virtue of roles, networks and interactions related to the pursuit of academic aims.

The Normative Concept

In contrast to descriptive approaches, normative accounts of community aim to clarify its meaning from a moral, political, or metaphysical point of view. Moving beyond social facts, they take the critical perspective of rational reflection on aims and values. Aristotle took community to be natural for human beings, communitarian thinkers such as MacIntyre (1984), Taylor (1989) and Sandel (1998) consider it essential to identity and morality, and Metz (2022) grounds his moral theory on the capacity to relate communally through identi-

fication and solidarity. Although theorizing of this sort inevitably makes assumptions about social reality, it ultimately aims to support normative, action-guiding conclusions.

As a normative ideal, *academic* community has been articulated in terms of generosity, hospitality, relationality, and conversation (Fitzpatrick 2021; Bennett 2003). The norms and purposes of an academic community value the shared pursuit of knowledge, cultivation of intellectual virtues, and moral and civic responsibility. They reflect the Humboldtian ideal of the university as a community of scholars united in the pursuit of truth through teaching and research (Humboldt 1810). They also align with the value of collegiality, “the centerpiece of collective academic legitimacy” (Craig et al. 2025, p. 2) where members of a community of experts interact in a spirit of mutual respect, cooperation, and shared responsibility for the academic mission of their institution (Bennett 1998; Fleming and Harley 2024). The ideal of academic community thus stands in stark contrast to the perception that academia is now fragmented and subject to managerial, consumerist, and individualist forces (Readings 1996). In a spirit of postmodern gloom, that perception may generate cynicism where talk of values is seen as impotent or hypocritical, considering the disciplinary power relations involved (Foucault 1977). However, in what follows, such reservations will be set aside to create space for a constructive argument on behalf of academic community as an ideal worthy of pursuit for the sake of academic and moral values. To make the need for such an argument vivid, let us begin by looking at how conditions in contemporary universities pose serious threats to any hopes for a thriving academic community.

Threats to academic community

Universities are sites for fluid and intersecting communities of students, staff, and faculty. When those communities include a shared pursuit of academic aims, they can be labelled academic. Although academic aims should provide institutions of higher education with their ultimate rationale, the sad truth is that academic community is under multiple threats in today’s universities. This is especially true of the community of professional academics, i.e. those who pursue academic aims based on their expert knowledge: teachers, researchers, post-doctoral and doctoral students. For these groups, the ideals of academic community coincide with their professional ideals. Before describing other threats, let us therefore first look at how the discourse of professionalism has been usurped to serve organizational ends.

Organizational (not Occupational) Professionalism

As a normative concept, professionalism refers to conduct and attitude appropriate for a mission of service to society through knowledge, skill, and care. It contrasts with the free-lance attitude of working merely for the sake of individual reward (Kristinsson 2014). Moral obligations of solidarity with fellow-professionals are not grounded in an implicit agreement of tit for tat but in a shared mission: We are in this together and therefore we have each other’s back. A professional ethos is thus the very opposite of what Bennett (2003) called “insistent individualism”, which sees colleagues merely as individuals contingently joined by a mutually beneficial agreement. Instead, it is the ethos of a community joined by shared ends and underlying values of competent and responsible service.

Professionalism calls for a peer-governed work environment. According to Evetts (2003, p. 407), the idea of occupational professionalism “includes an image of collegial work relations of mutual assistance and support rather than hierarchical, competitive or managerialist control” (Evetts 2003, p. 407). Freidson (2001) analyzed professionalism as a third logic of occupational control, different from those of the market and the organization, and Durkheim saw it as a form of moral community (Evetts 2003). For several decades, however, a different reality has been emerging. Most service professionals now work within organizations that have attempted to redefine professionalism to better serve managerial ends:

Professionals of all kinds and the institutions in which they work are subject to achievement targets to justify their receipt of public expenditure and which enable the performance of particular organizations (such as schools, universities and hospitals), and the professionals who work in them, to be measured and compared. (Evetts 2003, p. 408)

Evetts argued that organizations have used the appeal of professionalism “to convince, cajole and persuade employees, practitioners and other workers to perform and behave in ways which the organization or the institution deem to be appropriate, effective and efficient” (Evetts 2003, p. 411). This has resulted in a new form of professionalism characterized by “hierarchy, bureaucracy, output and performance measures and even standardization of work practices, all of which are more characteristic of organizational rather than professional forms of occupational control” (Evetts 2011, p. 412). The new discourse of organizational professionalism thus emphasizes rational-legal forms of authority, standardized procedures, hierarchical authority, managerialism, accountability, external regulation, target setting and performance review. It stands in stark contrast to the image or ideology of occupational professionalism that emphasizes collegial authority, discretion and occupational control of work, trust by clients and employers, and ethics monitored by professional associations (Evetts 2009).

As widely documented (Bolden et al. 2014; Craig et al. 2025), universities are prime examples of the processes Evetts described. The influence of New Public Management on efforts to increase productivity and efficiency in European higher education includes funding-based incentives, output monitoring and measurement, competitive ranking of personnel and institutions, performance management, performance pay, and accountability systems. Following a neoliberal turn, today’s universities are characterized by increased managerialism emphasizing competition, marketization, and monitoring efficiency through outcome measurement. And yet, occupational professionalism persists within organizationally managed limits (Beatson et al. 2021; Noordegraaf 2015; Siekkinen et al. 2020).

Professionalism in universities exhibits a hybridity of organizational and occupational elements. A study based on interviews with top and middle managers at four Finnish universities found strong signs of organizational professionalism under categories of change, including policies on academic work and management, control and evaluation, standardization and competition. It also found continuing elements of occupational professionalism such as power and authority of academic professionals (especially those in high positions), trust, competence, identity, and work culture, diversity and collegial relations (Siekkinen et al. 2020).

From the standpoint of valuing academic community, the hybrid situation described in the Finnish study looks quite bleak albeit with a possible silver lining. The organizational elements tend to fragment academic communities. As collegial governance structures erode, universities become managed workplaces rather than a community of scholars. Instead of

being autonomous professionals trusted with collegial decision-making, academics become employees subject to hierarchical, performance-based control. As a possible silver lining, however, the fact that occupational elements persist may reflect a survival of an ethos of community based on shared ends, collegial dialogue, and mutual respect (Bolden et al. 2014; Siekkinen et al. 2020).

Individualism

Excessive individualism is a common theme in contemporary critiques of the academy. It is reinforced by a neoliberal ethos of management emphasizing productivity measures, audit and accountability, commodification and economic growth, competition and rankings, prestige and excellence (Skea 2021; Gasser 2024). This institutional and cultural environment poses a serious threat to academic community (Bolden et al. 2014; Macfarlane 2016; Miller 2019; Fitzpatrick 2021). Bennett (2003) argued that a “robust, respectful academic community” is undermined by “insistent individualism”, according to which community is merely a collection of individuals preoccupied by self-promotion, contingently joined by a mutually beneficial social contract, but ultimately loyal only to themselves. When academic culture leads to this mode of thinking, our academic selves are diminished, according to Bennett. By contrast, members of a healthy academic community regard their individual good as intertwined with the common good and their learnedness as a shared endeavor. To build such a community, we need to acknowledge the fundamental relationality of our academic selves.

Managerialism

Metz (2017) defines managerialism as the instrumental logic of modern economies and states calling for uniform, measurable production outputs. He argues that the basic problem with managerialism in higher education is its tendency to degrade communal relationships among academics as well as between them and managers, students, and wider society. Through a series of examples that should look familiar to anyone working in contemporary academia, Metz shows how managerialism undermines community: Implementing support programs for researchers without consulting the researchers themselves impedes cooperation and a sense of togetherness. Reliance on a chain of command instead of collegial dialogue prioritizes bureaucratic control over communal relationships. Unilaterally imposed bonus systems, designed to boost institutional finance or prestige, ignore the value of mutual understanding and agreement, reduce the influence of academic judgment and risk undermining academic interests, including the interest in mutual aid and helping students and the broader public. Together, these examples demonstrate how managerial reliance on bureaucratic control and quantifiable measures undermines the identity and solidarity that constitute academic community.

Retreat from Academic Citizenship

Academic citizenship refers to “those activities distinct from research and teaching that support and offer services to both the university and wider society” (Macfarlane and Burg 2018; see also Albia and Cheng 2023). The managerial, neoliberal turn involving orga-

nizational professionalism means that professional recognition increasingly depends on individual achievement and market-oriented performance. Consequently, academics are no longer motivated or structurally supported to engage in collective responsibilities. Macfarlane (2005) warned that without a renewed commitment to academic citizenship, higher education risks becoming fragmented and utilitarian, detached from its traditional role as a moral and civic institution. Signs of that fragmentation are all too abundant. Bolden et al. (2014) found that when invited to discuss their experience of academic citizenship, academics expressed ambivalence and dissonance, a sense of disengagement from their own institutions alongside genuine passion and commitment to academic values. The authors concluded that renewed academic citizenship requires “a sense of shared identity and belonging to an identifiable community.”

Troubled Collegiality

A closely related concept is that of collegiality, referred to by Smith and Walker (2024) as “the foundation of academic citizenship,” and which according to Bennett (1998) ought to be based on professional community and togetherness. Collegiality comprises a broad cluster of elements including participatory and collective decision-making, a presumption of shared values, absence of hierarchy, supportiveness, a shared commitment to a common good, trust beyond a typical workplace, and professional autonomy (Craig et al. 2025; Dearlove 1997; Bess 1992; Fleming and Harley 2024). Analyzing data from a research university in the UK, Craig et al. (2025) found a mismatch between traditional understandings of collegiality and its contemporary embodiment, due to increased diversity and neoliberal managerialism. “Academic housekeeping” was found to be disproportionately done by women and marginalized groups, and efforts to recognize and reward collegiality involved opaque processes benefitting those with more power and status. To counter this unfairness, the authors joined Fleming and Harley (2024) in suggesting that collegiality must be defined more concretely and requirements for it made central and mandatory rather than peripheral and optional.

It is hard to object to a more transparent recognition of collegiality. Efforts to quantify, measure, and assess it may rectify injustices within current management systems and counter incentives for disengagement. However, such efforts fail to address the underlying problem of lack of community. In an instrumental culture, measurements of collegiality put it in the service of organizational goals rather than collective self-government, and this is in tension with how collegiality was originally understood (Smith and Walker 2024; Fleming and Harley 2024). While adding measures of collegiality adjusts individual incentives in a positive direction, it does little to alleviate dissonance and fragmentation in a work environment that otherwise continues to encourage individualistic competition. Ultimately, the obstacle for genuine academic community is not insufficient measurement of collegial tasks; it is the very obsession with measurement and organizational control that inflicts the higher education sector.

Communities grow organically. Echoing Evetts’ account of the advance of organizational professionalism, Gavin et al. (2023) cautioned against managerial discourse co-opting collegiality to enforce conformity with institutional policy rather than stimulate genuine community. Through auto-ethnographic reflections, the authors provided a practice-based vision of how academics could reclaim collegiality and community through collective resistance,

defining and practicing collegiality on their own terms. Their report of intentional collaboration and mutual care illustrates how academic citizenship and solidarity remain possible, even amid structural pressures toward individualism and competition. Importantly, what they describe does not appear to be institutionally managed collegiality but rather organic community, arising perhaps out of their shared love of knowledge, which according to Rowland (2008) academics must profess, lest the collegium become indistinguishable from the corporation.

Why Academic Community Matters

Contemporary universities could certainly do much better in providing hospitable conditions for academic communities. While many will agree that this is a cause for worry, little will change without a solid understanding of why academic community is so important. This section contributes to such understanding by providing (1) value-theoretical analysis of reasons to value academic community, (2) substantive examples of how academic values require community, and (3) an argument for the moral significance of academic community.

Value-Theoretical Analysis

Why should our concern for academic values, such as knowledge, understanding, learning, and virtue, lead us to cultivate an ideal of academic community? To map out possible answers, let us make use of classic distinctions in value theory (Zimmerman 2021). Valuing something extrinsically means valuing it for the sake of something else while valuing it intrinsically means valuing it for its own sake while allowing for explanations of what makes it intrinsically valuable. When we value academic community for the sake of academic values, we are valuing it extrinsically, either for its instrumental effects on academic values or for its necessary or non-necessary contribution to them. We can similarly value academic community extrinsically for the sake of human flourishing. Additionally, we can value academic community intrinsically by reference to the academic values it incorporates and by its contribution to human flourishing.

First then, it is easy to see academic community as *instrumentally* valuable in producing academically valuable outcomes. From this perspective, academic community is valuable in virtue of its consequences: By forming and maintaining communities, we generate academically valuable outcomes more securely than would otherwise be possible: skills and virtues are developed, new knowledge is produced, and a deeper understanding achieved. The valued effects of academic community could indeed be anything that its organizational power might help bring about, including leverage for improving wages and working conditions, which in turn could be instrumental in furthering academic values. From this point of view, academic values provide reasons to value academic community instrumentally.

Second, we may consider academic community to be valuable in virtue of its *non-causal contribution* to academic values. For example, it has been convincingly argued within social epistemology that for something to count as scientific knowledge, it must be generated and appraised in the context of a scientific community with a certain ethos (Merton 1979; Longino 1990). This entails that scientific community is valuable for being a necessary condition for the very possibility of scientific knowledge; it is thus not the causal effects

of community that make it valuable but rather the complex value (scientific knowledge) of which it is a necessary part. Another example could be the value of learning, which is surely an academic value. Suppose we agree with Dewey (1930) and Vygotsky (1978) that learning is necessarily a communal achievement involving communication and shared activity. Granting this, there can be no learning without community, which in turn derives value from this constitutive relationship to the value of learning. From this perspective then, academic values such as scientific knowledge and learning provide reasons to value academic community non-instrumentally for being a constitutive element of the academic value in question. In both cases, academic community is a necessary component of academic value.

Third, academic community can be thought of as *intrinsically* valuable. On this view, there is something about academic community itself that makes it valuable in a way that cannot be reduced to either its causal effects or its non-causal contribution to a complex academic value. This third view allows that the intrinsic value of academic community might be partly explained by the value of its component academic values. To be truly intrinsic, however, the value of academic community must add something to the sum of the value of its components. For example, we might find it distinctly valuable to experience a sense of belonging that accompanies joint activities of learning and knowledge-seeking. In addition to realizing the component values of learning and new knowledge, these joint activities might thus create a supervenient value of community that is part of human flourishing. On this view, then, the intrinsic value of academic community is partly explained by its having learning and knowledge-seeking as its components, and the experienced value of belonging and participation can be explained by its contribution to human flourishing.

Human flourishing enters this model also as a reason to value academic community extrinsically. Academic community has instrumental value for human flourishing insofar as it helps us acquire something useful, e.g. skills, knowledge, connections, and opportunities in life. Even more importantly however, belonging to an academic community can be one way of flourishing as a human being through relationships and shared activities. As discussed toward the end of this section, this reason to value academic community can be further articulated along the lines of a relational understanding of morality.

In sum, academic community has instrumental and contributory value from the standpoint of academic values and human flourishing. Academic community also has intrinsic value, explained in part by its consisting in the realization of academic values, and in part by its constitutive relation to human flourishing. These statements are not mutually exclusive. It is therefore not necessary to decide which of these possibilities should be adopted as a general analysis; we should value academic community for all these reasons. To substantiate these claims further, let us look at a few specific ways in which academic values depend on academic community.

Substantive Examples

The previous section built on value theory to identify reasons to value academic community from the standpoint of academic values and human flourishing. To complement that analysis, this section highlights several ways in which academic community is integral to the pursuit of specific academic values. Together, the analysis and examples imply that if institutions of higher education operate in ways that undermine academic community, they betray the values that it is their central purpose to serve.

First, it is through academic community that we develop our very understanding of academic values. We have referred to these values at a very abstract level as knowledge, understanding, learning, education, and virtue. This may not be an exhaustive list, and there is certainly room for debate about how to further characterize and pursue these values. Disagreements on such issues do not undermine academic communities. Far from requiring uniform answers, academic communities thrive on conversation and rational debate with a shared purpose of better understanding and serving academic values. Active membership in an academic community includes participation in such discussions where disagreements are part of a collective pursuit of better understanding.

To illustrate, consider the debate about autonomy as an educational ideal for college students. Many agree that it is an important academic aim to help students mature toward increased autonomy; and yet, there is disagreement about what this means. Some interpret autonomy as the ability to choose a “conception of the good” freely from a range of options (Brighouse 2006; Nussbaum 1997, 2010) while others see it as identical to the intellectual virtues of charity and humility (Ebels-Duggan 2015). Like all academic discourse, this debate occurs within an academic community, which is here engaged in the interpretation and reflective pursuit of the academic value of autonomy. Generally, academic values require interpretation, and interpretive conversations aiming at deeper understanding are part and parcel of the interactions that constitute academic community.

Second, norms of academic inquiry would not persist without academic community. Advances in social epistemology have revealed how success in producing and acquiring knowledge depends on social practices consisting of norm-governed patterns of interaction that affect the formation of true or justified beliefs (Buchanan 2015). From this perspective, the academic pursuit of knowledge and understanding obviously requires the right communal norms, and these norms could not exist without academic communities. Relatedly, scientific knowledge could not exist, not even in principle, without a scientific community where cumulative scientific discourse proceeds and new knowledge is certified through peer judgment (Longino 1990; Kitcher 1993). A key value in that context is academic freedom, which similarly requires a community of peers (Calhoun 2009; Frímannsson et al. 2022).

Another example is the value of justice. Whether justice is an academic value may be controversial, but most would agree it is a worthy goal related to civic virtue and can be effectively pursued in and through academia. Powerful arguments have been made on behalf of academic community as a manifestation and generator of justice (Kelly 2015; McPherson 2015). Similarly for other fundamental social values, such as democracy (Bertram 2015; Kristinsson 2023; Nussbaum 2010). Arguments on behalf of these values as worthy goals in universities generally imply that academic community is essential to their realization.

Third, the academic value of learning requires community both instrumentally and non-instrumentally. To illustrate, let us widen the scope of discussion to include classroom communities. Weithman (2015) argues for an ideal of academic friendship, a relationship between teacher and students akin to the companionship of fellow travelers. Within that relationship, Weithman argues, a teacher can serve the most important goal of college education: the broadening of students’ imagination through vivid exposure to previously unfamiliar ways of thinking and being. This can occur in a classroom community where teachers model an authentic commitment to intellectual life and the autonomy that comes with following the authority of reason, qualities like open-mindedness, intellectual honesty, concern for evidence, clarity of reasoning, soundness of argument, appreciation of

complexity, confidence, self-respect, humility, and love of learning. Weithman argues that as a counterweight to a materialistic culture, the lasting effects of an academic friendship can influence how students, later in life, consider their choices as citizens, participants and leaders in work-life, civil society or politics. In other words, participation in this kind of academic community contributes to learning and can have a lasting effect on students' way of thinking and acting in the direction of academic values.

As another example of how learning depends on community, Callard's (2017) account of the value of liberal arts education highlights how the formation of self and identity is tied to community and relationality. She articulates the educational value of aspiration, where students with an inchoate sense of what they want and who they are explore uncharted paths for themselves in the unique communal and cultural environment of the college or university.

Together, the examples discussed in this subsection illustrate how academic values and academic community are two sides of the same coin; one can hardly exist without the other. To add yet another argumentative layer, let us next consider the moral significance of academic community.

Morality

The normative arguments on behalf of academic community offered so far have been largely premised on academic values, which should of course be the bedrock values of any institution of higher education. Assuming a different starting point, this subsection suggests an argument from morality: A relational understanding of morality offers powerful reasons to cultivate academic community.

As already mentioned, Bennett (2003) argued that to build academic community, we need to acknowledge the fundamental relationality of our academic selves. A relational conception of the academic self is supported by moral theories that prize our capacity to partake in communal relationships. Metz (2022) points to identity and solidarity as two major strands in a relational understanding of what it is to develop as moral human beings in community with others. Identity refers to a sense of belonging, participation, and being part of a whole, while solidarity refers to sympathetic commitment to others, responding to their needs and acting for their good. The opposites of identity and solidarity are divisiveness and ill-will. Identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them is, according to Metz, not only an attractive interpretation of what it is to relate communally; it also reveals a capacity that is good for its own sake. For Metz, the capacity to be subject and object of communal relationships is of superlative value, and honoring or respecting it is fundamental to moral rightness (Metz 2022).

From the perspective of Metz' relational moral theory, our moral obligations, including those of professional morality, are grounded in our capacity to relate communally. Strong academic identities create and justify strong commitments to academic values and correspondingly strong collegial obligations. In these ways, relational ethics allows us to appreciate how the value of academic community consists not only in its academic importance, but also in its moral significance.

It may be objected that a relational moral framework is too limited to account for the moral principles of respect for autonomy. Fitzpatrick (2024) complains that the concept of community is too often used by those in power to suppress dissent in the name of conflict-free norms. It may be suspected that a moral framework that emphasizes community would

support such appeals, leading to the worry that a relational understanding might somehow justify suppression of individual opinion, speech, and criticism, presumably by adding that these freedoms undermine solidarity. While this objection might have validity against some communitarian understandings of morality, it would grossly misconstrue the sort of relational ethics articulated and defended by Metz (2022). Academic solidarity must cohere with the central norms of academic freedom, critical thinking, and academic judgment. Relational morality therefore does not justify suppressing such freedoms in the name of academic community. Quite the opposite: if these freedoms are in danger, solidarity within academic community requires coming to their defense.

A kindred worry might be that relational morality would somehow justify excessive communal demands into areas of personal privacy. Bennett (2003) notes that when university presidents and deans emphasize community, faculty sometimes feel uncomfortable: “We came together voluntarily as professionals and we think that our community should be one of mutual academic purposes and commitment to reason, not necessarily one of shared personal intimacy” (p. 52). Would relational ethics justify such demands for “shared personal intimacy” among academic colleagues in the name of solidarity? Again, the answer is no. On a relational understanding, collegial obligations are limited by considerations of identity and respect for professional relationships. For example, the collective identity of medical colleagues derives from their shared ends of understanding and dealing with injury and illness; therefore, they are mutually obligated to help each other regarding these ends. They have no collegial obligation to help each other with tasks such as mowing each other’s lawn, cleaning the garage or babysitting children (Metz 2022, p. 181). Similarly, academic colleagues have special obligations to each other based on thinking of themselves as a ‘we’ in the context of collective ends of knowledge-seeking, learning, educating, etc. The scope of the obligation is limited by these ends. Personal friendships can of course grow out of professional relationships, but colleagues are not obliged to develop personal friendship or to act as if such a friendship has developed.

A relational understanding of the academic self goes hand in hand with a relational understanding of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). It means that a person considers herself part of a ‘we’ in the context of academic ends, creating moral obligations of solidarity with colleagues in matters related to the common pursuit of these ends. It does not mean that her academic self is her only source of identity and solidarity. For deans or other managers to expect faculty members to form a community unrelated to academic ends would therefore certainly fail to respect their autonomy as people with complex relational identities. In addition, invoking community to suppress dissent among faculty would of course contradict values that are indeed central to their identity as academics.

The moral framework of relational ethics reveals that the ideal of academic community promises not only a more fulfilling and coherent sense of occupational purpose, but also a way of relating to others that is more satisfying morally than the current environment of cut-throat competition. Combined with the previous subsections, the arguments presented here thus suggest that academic community is not only part and parcel of academic values but also of great moral significance. It is therefore a very serious matter if institutional structures that ought to serve academic values and be worthy of respect tend to undermine rather than strengthen academic community. We have already seen plenty of reasons to think this is indeed the case. The next section considers prospects for reversing those unfortunate trends, given the complex power dynamics involved.

Cultivating Community

Cultivating academic community in today's universities is clearly not an easy task, but it is an urgent one. According to Skúlason (2015), a university has three interrelated facets: It is a company engaged in efficient production of marketable goods, it is an institution serving the public good, and it is a community in shared pursuit of academic goods. Ideally, a university ought to be arranged in such a way that the goods of each side are properly realized. It seems clear that contemporary universities have lost this balance, allowing the logic of production to infiltrate and dominate the other two sides. The triumph of market-based managerialism has resulted in a blurred vision of the public good together with a fragmented and dissatisfied community.

This final section argues that to turn things around, we need inspired, collective action, based on a solid understanding of the value of academic community. The need for institutional and cultural change will be discussed first, followed by reflection on the complexities and power dynamics involved.

Institutional and Cultural Change

The task of cultivating academic community in today's universities calls for a two-pronged approach: On the one hand, the structural forces that work against genuine community must be challenged to mitigate their harmful effects; on the other, an academic culture that supports academic community must be nurtured and developed. On the structural side, universities would do well to reduce their emphasis on competition, ranking, brand, marketing, and output management. This may be impossibly risky for individual institutions, but collective, sector-wide policy decisions certainly seem possible. Relatedly, systems of reward, recruitment and promotion must be changed to reflect a healthy balance between Skúlason's three sides of a university and reverse the well documented retreat from academic citizenship.

As for the academic culture, a good first step would be for academics to raise their awareness of the value of academic community, and as a result organize collective efforts to combat the current culture of individualism and competition. It is crucial that these efforts be collective to avoid free rider problems and the oppression of marginalized workers who otherwise would continue to bear the brunt of collegial work. It is up to academics themselves to press for structural changes that support the development of genuine academic community. The problem is that the current fragmentation and individualist culture make it unlikely that academics will have the solidarity needed to enact real change, especially among those who have a vested interest in the status quo.

The cultivation of academic community will require a different mindset, one that allows academics to experience collegiality as arising out of academic relations among fellow professionals who commune based on a shared love of knowledge (Rowland 2008). We need to envision a robust and healthy academic community, which according to Bennett (2003) features hospitality and conversation, the very opposite of corrosive individualism, where people "treat publications and grant funding as weapons, and wear them as adornments – making the implicit statement that to have more is to be more." (p. 54).

We need more inspiring ideas of how to conceive of academic community and the institutional environment that supports it. A recent example is Fitzpatrick's (2021) book-length advocacy for generous thinking. Her diagnosis of the current situation in universities is

familiar: Academia claims to be a community of scholars but operates in silos where competition, critique, individual achievement, solitary work, and rivalries are the norm. To turn things around, a real community must be built on generous thinking that centres around listening, humility and openness to critique and results in mutual support rather than competition. The moral foundation of generosity, according to Fitzpatrick, is an ethics of care, emphasizing the value of relationships and mutual responsibility. Generous thinking should motivate scholars to collaborate internally but also engage generously with the public, sharing knowledge and listening to community needs. The university itself should be a kind of commonwealth, where governance, teaching, and research are collaborative rather than hierarchical. Building this kind of community requires rethinking labour practices and the evaluation of teaching, service, public engagement and research.

Fitzpatrick's project challenges us to reflect on fundamental values and purposes in higher education, with implications for university governance. To build community, academic culture must counter the view that higher education is an investment for private gain and discourage academics from functioning as production-line workers competing for money and prestige. Based on abundant descriptive evidence about the current state of academia, we should put our focus on academic values and their dependence on academic community. Increased discussion and debate around fundamental purposes across academic fields and institutions would strengthen academic community and nudge academic culture in a positive direction. Although discussion alone will not alter facts on the ground (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist 2016), it can create an empowering solidarity that helps motivate change. Suggestive ideas include Bennett's view that ideal academic community consists in relationality, hospitality, and conversation. They also include Fitzpatrick's view that academic community should be cultivated through generous thinking, with emphasis on listening, humility, and openness to critique. Whenever we, as academics, take such ideas seriously enough to discuss, develop, and put into practice, we are contributing to a cultural change that improves conditions for academic community.

Complexity and power

It would be naïve to leave this topic without acknowledging its complexity. Academic community comes in many layers with conflicting loyalties and fractured identities. A typical faculty member thus belongs to a department with its own disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) objectives within an organization, which in turn delineates a broader and more multi-layered academic community. In addition, each discipline has its own professional network across institutions and countries, and academics commune in this way beyond their own discipline as well. When encouraged to help cultivate their academic community, people might reasonably respond by asking "which one?"

What is worse, cultivating one community may be at the direct expense of another. Entry into the academic profession occurs through disciplinary channels, where training for success means preparing for fierce competition among individuals for positions, grants, and opportunities. Socialization that is effective in this regard comes easily into conflict with the ideal of collegiality, understood as the equal power and responsibility of colleagues for running a program, department, or other academic unit within an organization. Having entered the profession, it is easy to see how competition for prestige may lead individuals to then shy away from service and move toward nurturing their disciplinary identity.

The upshot of these considerations is that when the cultivation of academic community centers around disciplinary silos, the result may contribute to the fragmentation of universities, which in turn use managerial means of structuring and running the organization. Emphasizing the value of community can thus be a double-edged sword. It is noteworthy, however, that Bennet, Fitzpatrick, and Metz all valorize relationality. What should be valued is not simply community but our capacity to relate communally to each other. Insular communities can be vehicles for success, but they also invite an “us vs. them” mentality, division and even ill-will toward outsiders. The aim of cultivating academic community for the sake of academic and moral values means that individuals must seek to embrace their multi-layered academic identities and exercise solidarity in ways that avoid undermining any of them. This can occur, for example, through collaboration on projects within or beyond one’s institution with colleagues who do not share one’s disciplinary identity. It can also occur by exercising the values of generosity, listening, and humility beyond the confines of academic communities.

None of this is easy, and it is important to be aware of the power dynamics at play. Collaboration can mean working with one’s peers, but it can also mean selling them out (Shuffelton 2023). In a hierarchical organization, academic leaders typically find themselves torn between upper management and faculty, while faculty members must constantly navigate a path between their various conflicting loyalties as well as their personal ambitions and self-interest. Community cannot and should not be commanded by administrators – complying with such a demand can be interpreted as collaboration in the negative sense, as betrayal rather than solidarity. Community should grow organically, and like other organic growth it requires cultivation. How to craft that cultivation remains an open question. But I venture to suggest that it involves a willingness to ask questions like: “When am I, through silence or collaboration, complicit in undermining the interests of some of my peers?” And “what could I do to help my colleagues, out of a sense of solidarity?”

Conclusion

This paper offers a normative defense of the academic community as both the foundation and moral compass of higher education. Against the backdrop of pervasive managerialism, individualism, and neoliberal reform, it argues that the very values that justify universities—knowledge, understanding, learning, and intellectual virtue—are inseparable from the communal relationships that sustain them. When universities prioritize competition, accountability metrics, and “excellence” over shared purpose, they erode not only collegial structures but also the moral and epistemic conditions that make academic life meaningful.

A distinction is drawn between descriptive and normative understandings of community. Descriptively, academic communities are networks of scholars and students interacting through shared roles and values. Normatively, however, academic community represents an aspirational ideal grounded in generosity, hospitality, relationality, and conversation – the moral and intellectual conditions under which the pursuit of truth and understanding can flourish. This ideal contrasts sharply with the managerial university, where academic citizenship and collegiality have been transformed into bureaucratic instruments of organizational control.

Five major threats are identified: organizational professionalism (where managerial logic displaces collegial self-governance), excessive individualism, managerialism, retreat from academic citizenship, and troubled collegiality. Together, these forces fragment academic life, reduce autonomy, and undermine solidarity. Yet traces of professional ethos and community persist, suggesting that renewal is possible.

Through a value-theoretical analysis, it is shown that academic community has instrumental, contributive, and intrinsic worth: it produces and sustains academic values, is a constitutive element of learning and knowledge, and contributes to human flourishing by fulfilling our relational nature. Substantive examples illustrate that academic values cannot exist independently of community, which is also of profound moral significance according to relational ethics.

Cultivating academic community thus requires structural reform and cultural reorientation toward cooperation, care, and shared purpose. Drawing on Fitzpatrick's concept of "generous thinking" and Bennett's ideal of relational collegiality, the paper calls for collective resistance to individualism and managerial domination. Such reforms are not easy, given the complexity and power dynamics involved. Nevertheless, revitalizing academic community is essential to restoring integrity, purpose, and moral coherence to the modern university.

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