

A short note from Bob Pollack

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to you with my right foot elevated above my heart. Not an arcane ritual but the obligation of a guy who has broken his ankle and had it screwed back together by uptown colleagues.

No other lesson in humility has ever taken me with such visceral intensity. I will gladly accept all prayers of healing in the humble knowledge that our bodies are far more alike than our histories or our traditions.

I had planned to give a short talk here tonight, but Doctors' orders included two weeks more of going nowhere with my foot in the air. It turns out though, that does not mean you are free of me and my strong opinions about the proper role of University Seminars in the life of the University.

Robert Remez has kindly offered to allow me to share these thoughts with you by reading my talk for me. As he is both the Chair of our Advisory Board and a very good guy, I hope you will be patient as he channels me for a moment.

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Let me work outward from our Core. Since our founding last century, The University Seminars have been held to a set of boundaries on our actions. These rules are neither negotiable nor debatable, but absolutely definitional for us all. They derive from one initial principle: that though we are all smart, and though some of us are so smart that no one else compares, still we are each mortal and so in mortal need of each others' trust and affection.

By that principle, The University Seminars have very few rules, all of them tested by time to assure a future for every Seminar that is free of top-down ideology or censorship, free of hierarchical academic favoritism, free of Ivy snobbery, and most of all, free to make its own mistakes and by seeing them free to change at any time, to become a better seminar than anyone could have imagined.

I can collapse all of those rules into one: no honoraria. It is a bizarre notion, but there you have it. From our inception, the Seminars have steered clear of the faint but pungent odors of payoff and favoritism in this way, and in this way the hundreds of books and thousands of scholarly articles have emerged over the decades from our Seminars, their Symposia and our wonderful public lecture series, all remain untainted as well.

All that our Seminars have accomplished over the decades, they have done without even a pinch of purchased puffery, no matter the might and majesty of puffers who might well be attending and participating in any of them. We have inoculated ourselves well by this rule. As a result our colleagues in the Seminars are usually quite immune when various

academic infections of self-righteousness and power strike our colleagues in the Schools and Departments here.

The price we pay for all of this freedom and dignity is the price paid by any small self-respecting social structure embedded in a larger and more competitive one, as we are embedded in the University. That is, we must remain peripheral, marginal, small; a curiosity but no more. Nor would I say that is a bad deal, so long as we keep our freedom. I suspect it is no accident that our founder Frank Tannenbaum came from upstate New York, home of so many noble but marginal social experiments over the past few centuries.

Just for a moment, though, let's have the pleasure of a Gedankenexperiment. Let's imagine an alternate University. In this one, our little organization has its name slightly altered, reversing the adjective and the noun. That would make us "Seminars University." What would Seminars University be like, and how would it perhaps have something of value to give as a gift to its life-long neighbor, Columbia University?

As a University, it would have the obligation to create new knowledge, and to teach. That obligation would extend to teaching what is known and to teaching how to think critically and clearly about the differences among the known, the unknown and possibly unknowable.

As a University, it would have for its faculty a freedom to choose among the many paths of argument and experiment, and to write and publish without fear of political censorship because of disagreement with anyone at all associated with the University, no matter how lofty.

So far, so good. But as a University it would fail completely at one point: it would not have any students. The distinction between student and faculty would simply not be one that Seminars University could recognize. Rather, all of its faculty would also be all of its students, and vice versa.

Think if it: no tuition, no admissions, no athletics, only discourse, night and day, and then publications on paper and the web. Not "no students" like the Institute for Advanced Study; rather, "all students," so that as a University it could not have any fixed departments nor titles, only scholarship, discourse and the pleasure of mutual disagreement without rancor, and with wine.

May I say from the vantage point of a man on his back with his foot in the air, I think Columbia University is fortunate not to have to compete with Seminars University, but rather to simply have the obligation to keep us warm and cozy, and to share in our discussions going forth.

Enjoy the evening.

Bob Pollack

Director
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