

Director's Report to University Seminars Chairs

November 6, 2013

Robert Pollack, Director

Last year Robert Remez read my report to you all, while I had been immobilized by a broken ankle. Glad to be back.

I closed that paper last year with notion that we can best understand ourselves, whether as a group or society, a culture or community, a collective or movement, if we contrast University Seminars with a hypothetical "Seminars University." The main difference between the two would be this: a Seminars University would have faculty and students, and would recognize the difference through degrees awarded in name of faculty to students, whereas The University Seminars has neither faculty nor students, only colleagues.

So, while Seminars U would sponsor many sorts of public events to recognize the hierarchal distinction between students and faculty - think graduation - the University Seminars ideal is wholly private and very modest: a set of a dozen or so folks in a room, testing ideas from one of them by discourse, without risk. Here is how our Founder, Frank Tannenbaum put it, fifty years ago:

"The free flow of conversation between scholars or practitioners about the meaning of the activity to which their lives are dedicated has a quality of revelation, of discovery, of the excitement of original publication. I had learned perhaps from the Socratic Dialogs, that under certain conditions verbal communication can be a deeply creative and synthesizing experience. If it were only possible to contrive a continuing fellowship among people who were trying to solve some riddle, unravel a mystery, deal with a perennial issue of public concern, then - if conditions were right - we might achieve this long sought for but subtly evasive value, mutual understanding among the professions and between the members of the academy."

We are now five years after the great bubble of housing prices burst, bringing the university's endowment down and the Seminars endowment down with it. At last both endowments are in recovery, as is our economy, however slowly. I want to mark the moment by reviewing the fiscal implications today and for the future, of the differences between The University Seminars and the hypothetical Seminars University.

The University Seminars income is the yield on an endowment put in the hands of the University Trustees some fifty years ago by the widow of Frank Tannenbaum, Jane Belo. By accepting the terms of her will, Columbia Trustees agreed not to take the accrued funds from the endowment of The Seminars for any other purpose. Later, by agreement with the Provost in 1987, The Seminars were allowed to seek further funds, providing we did not make use in any way of the office of University Development, and that we did not in any way compete with University fundraising.

This fiscal year, as in all previous years, fair weather or foul, we have returned some of the yield to the principal, but in doing that we find we did not escape the 2008 disaster untouched. We find ourselves facing the need as well, to reduce our commitments for the coming fiscal year, in order to be sure we will be able to return some funds next year and thereafter. The question then becomes how to commit less money for next year in such a way that the central distinction between University Seminars and Seminars University, remains protected and even enhanced?

Here are proposals for next year's budget that will accomplish that; these are the shared work of the Seminars office – Alice Newton, Gessy Alvarez, Summer Hart, Pamela Guardia and me – and the Advisory Board chaired by Robert Remez.

* Colleagues at Columbia who wish to propose a new Seminar or to revive one now in abeyance, will see no difference in the process for either of those welcome events.

* Seminars which share discourse among their members and which invite speakers who enhance the ongoing discourse of the Seminar and who also may become future members, will see little or no difference in the coming year.

* Seminars whose members generate manuscripts that are then accepted for publication, will see no difference in the process by which the Seminars office will provide a subvention for publication on the recommendation of the Advisory Board.

* Rapporteurs, so essential for the smooth running of Seminars, will continue to be paid an hourly stipend for each seminar. They may submit time sheets for up to 10 hr./seminar without further ado. However, when their time for a seminar exceeds 10 hr., Chairs will now have to make the case for the additional expense. With that in place, Rapporteurs will continue to cost our endowment the considerable amount their services represent: at 6 meetings/year, 85 seminars may expect to cost us about \$100,000/year at 10 hr./seminar.

* The Seminars will continue to provide a subvention for Faculty House meals by members of Seminars. No difference to report, though we have to be aware that as tenants of Faculty House, we do not control our rates here.

* The Conferences and Symposia organized by Seminars are the parts of our current operation that most closely resemble Seminars University functions. We will act accordingly: we will now ask organizers of private or public Symposia to assure in their application for Seminars funds, that other organizations will be sharing the overall cost of the event with The Seminars.

* The budget for Symposia to be held in Academic year 2013-14 has been spent, so when we have received request for funding for the spring semester, we have asked Chairs to put off the symposium to the following fall so that we might have the Advisory Board consider the merits of the case which we would commit funds for the following year.

* We will continue to provide funds for Rapporteurs to assist in Symposia, but we will cap the cost to The Seminars at 20 hr./conference, starting in January

2014. Beginning then, we will ask that any rapporteur expense running over 20 hours, be paid out of other funds supporting the conference or symposium.

I hope you will all approve these boundary conditions, and that you will agree they reflect our founding principals. And the future? We have proposed here a reasonable response to the future in fiscal terms, but my predecessors knew as I have learned, that money is necessary but never sufficient.

I have also learned that the Director can and should honor the past by way of planning for the future of these Seminars. Toward that end, we have the following proposal for you to consider.

2015 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the book that earlier quote was taken from, "A Community of Scholars." It is a history of the first twenty years of the Seminars edited by Frank Tannenbaum, with a Foreword by President Grayson Kirk and an Introduction by Professor of Physics and Nobel Laureate I.I. Rabi.

How shall we mark this fiftieth anniversary? I invite you as the Chairs of the current Seminars, to consider the question, and let us know your thoughts. The subtext here is the question that I find most important and most troubling: What is the 21st century equivalent of a scholarly book?

I am sure there will be many questions, so now, please, let's open a discussion on these matters.