

Academic Buzzwords —

An exposé of higher ed jargon

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Lexicography is a ticklish business. Since curmudgeonly Dr. Johnson compiled the first English language dictionary, lexicographers have swung (precariously) from prescriptive to descriptive definitions. We now live in the permissive 1980s when one would not dare to say that a particular usage is pompous, foolish or — heaven forbid! — incorrect, and jaw-numbing terms with mind-numbing meanings arise to mislead, confuse and obfuscate.

As readers, we are often bewildered. And the language that bewilders us serves the ever popular purposes of furthering hidden agendas under the guise of value-neutrality, and concealing from everyone — including those who do it — the nature of what is being done.

The following is a collection of jargon which is currently used in higher education by both professors and administrators. These terms reflect the money, status, power and sex struggles that protect academics from an unhealthy preoccupation with teaching and scholarship. Our definitions are meant to be humorous, sarcastic, ironic or, on occasion, preposterously all too true.

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ACADEMIC BUZZWORDS

A

- ACADEMIC FREEDOM:** Permission to do whatever one wants — intellectually, politically, and in relationships with students.
- ACADEMIC ROMANCE:** Too sordid to define here.
- ACCURACY IN ACADEMIA:** Inducing the faculty to stop giving their students Left-wing propaganda and start giving them Right-wing propaganda.
- ACHIEVER (Over and Under):** (1) Over: stupid, (2) Under: lazy.
- AD HOC:** Decision made by an adhococracy (see below).
- ADHOCRACY:** Total organizational chaos.
- ADJUNCT PROFESSOR:** Slave.
- AFFIRMATIVE ACTION:** Discrimination against white males.
- ALIEN STUDENT:** Student from Jupiter or Saturn.
- ANGERENDIZEMENT:** This is virtually incomprehensible.
- APPLICANT POOL:** That part of the gymnasium where new students are recruited.
- ATTRITION:** (1) Students leaving, (2) Axing of junior faculty, (3) Senior faculty dying.

B

- BAD EXPERIENCE:** Axed.
- BOMBINATE:** Buzz: the prototypical buzzword.
- BRAINSTORM:** To waste time.
- BREAKTHROUGH:** Significant change, such as drinking three sixpacks in four hours.
- BRIEF OVERVIEW:** Description omitting inconvenient details.
- BULGE:** Too many students needing courses in a subject (Not to be confused with too few faculty).
- BUZZWORD:** A frequently used word that means more than it says, or says more than it means. Some of the words in this compilation are hopeful, rather than successful, candidates.

C

- CAFETORIUM:** Is this really a word?
- CASE METHOD:** Getting on someone's case.
- CERTIFICATION:** (1) Awarding a degree, (2) Declaring a person a lunatic.
- CHAIR:** Head of a department. You need four of these and a table for a dining set.
- CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP:** Something that is sadly lacking in educational circles.
- CHARM:** An attribute of some sub-atomic particles and virtually no academics. Those who do have it are not to be trusted.

CHRONOLOGICAL AGE: Age.

CLADISTICS: Activity taught in advanced physical education classes. For further details, see Kraft-Ebbing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

COLD BOOT: See warm boot.

COLLEGIALITY: Liking a candidate.

CONSERVATIVE: A radical with tenure.

COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS: The ability to present empty or sinister ideas in a superficially pleasing fashion.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: Education chaos.

CONCEPT: An idea usually ordained with a number, such as Concept Five, Concept Six, Concept Seven, or Concept Eight.

CONCEPTUALLY IMMATURE: Unorthodox.

CONSTANT: (1) Death, (2) Taxes, (3) Tension between faculty and administration.

CONTEXT: Circumambient conditions.

CONTINUING EDUCATION: Watching enough television to earn some academic credit.

COOPTATION: No definition available. (May have something to do with chicken houses.)

COURSE OBJECTIVES: What the teacher hopes the students will learn. Teachers who have these for long are themselves unable to learn.

CREATIVE PLANNING: Figuring out how to cope with a class of 50 students when only 30 seats are available.

CREDIT-HOUR PRODUCTION: Having x number of students sitting in one's classes for y hours a week. Not to be confused with education.

CRITICAL THINKING REQUIREMENT: The Full Employment For Philosophers Act.

CURRICULUM REFORM: A struggle for academic territory, often carried on in close conjunction with a strategic plan (see below).

CURRICULUM VITAE (also VITA): Glorified resume.

D

DECONSTRUCTION: A literary, artistic or cinematic analysis that allows the work to mean whatever one likes.

DEMONSTRATED SCHOLARSHIP: Publications that place one on the short list.

DEVIATION IQ: The intelligence of perverts. The perversion of intelligence.

DICHOTOMY: Schism, rupture, the relationship between faculty and administration.

DISALLOCATE: Rip-off.

DISPENSABLE: Not marketable, the academic equivalent of AIDS.

E

- EDUCATING THE WHOLE PERSON:** Abandoning intellectual and academic standards.
- EFFECTIVELY TERMINAL TENURE-TRACK POSITION:** The shaft.
- ELEGANT:** Attractive, but false.
- EMPIRICALLY VALIDATED:** Proved by meaningless statistics.
- EVALUATION:** A search for reasons to deny tenure.
- EVOLVING:** Changing. Does not distinguish one thing from another.
- EXCELLENCE:** A totally meaningless expression used in job descriptions, college catalogues and letters of reference.

F

- FACULTY SENATE:** Unicameral legislature without legislative power.
- FEEDBACK:** ¹(1) Confirmation of one's self-esteem, (2) Backstabbing reports on colleagues to the administration.
- FLEXIBILITY:** (1) Lack of principle, (2) Power.
- FLOATING HOLIDAY:** Time spent in Acapulco.
- FOLLOWERSHIP:** A small boat whose crew feeds off the waste of larger yachts.
- FREE RADICAL:** An unemployed Sixties activist.
- FRINGE BENEFITS:** We all know what these are.
- FULLBRIGHT SCHOLAR:** CIA agent.
- FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE):** The unit of academic currency.
- FUNCTIONAL ILLITERATE:** Student.

G

- GAME THEORY:** Futile attempt to understand the administration.
- GARROTTE:** To play academic politics with a heavy hand.
- GET CONTROL OVER OUR OWN LIVES:** Slogan of those who are attempting to seize power within the organization so they can control the lives of others.
- GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:** (1) Another opportunity for paperwork, (2) Quotas.
- GRAB:** To take students from other departments so as to increase one's department's credit-hour production (see above).
- GRANT, FELLOWSHIP, SCHOLARSHIP:** Money.
- GYPSY SCHOLAR:** Frequent victim of a strategic plan (see below).

H

- HALO EFFECT:** Looking skilled for no particular reason.
- HAZING:** Behavior of older students toward younger stu-

dents, of senior faculty toward junior faculty, of administration toward faculty, of boards of trustees toward administration.

- HERMENEUTICS:** Interpreting the text as one sees fit.
- HIDDEN AGENDA:** Motives with non-explicit purpose. (If you understand this, you should join the CIA.)
- HOPEFUL MONSTERS:** Students.

I

- IMPASSE:** The point at which education finds itself today.
- IMPLEMENTATION:** Forcing something down the throats of the faculty.
- IN-BASKET TRAINING:** (1) Method of analyzing problems that results in basket cases, (2) Learning to dunk under the tutelage of either Bill Russell or Wilt Chamberlin.
- IN-HOUSE CANDIDATE:** The person who will get the job, even though we have advertised it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- IN LOCO PARENTIS:** Vain attempt to keep students away from drugs and sex.
- INNOVATIVE:** Adopted and supported because it is considered to be a practical advance in accomplishing goals. (Needless to say, it seldom is.)
- INSIGHT:** Discovering the weak points of the administration.
- INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** The production of slides.
- INTERFACE:** Point of interaction between two radically different spheres, such as the life of the mind and an educational institution.
- INTERNAL ORIENTATION:** The feeling that one can outwit the SOBs (occasionally).
- IRRESISTIBLE GRACE:** The support of a powerful patron.

K

- KOOL:** How students describe the faculty they like.

L

- LIBERATION MOVEMENT:** Chance for the privileged to get the advantages of membership in an oppressed class.
- LIFE-TIME LEARNERS:** Students who remain in school because no one has the guts to fail them.
- LIMITED ATONEMENT:** Tenure quota (see below).
- LITIGATION CONSCIOUS:** Fearful of the assaults of hungry lawyers.

M

- MAGNET SCHOOL:** An educational center where the young are taught how to attract.

MANAGEMENT: Giving faculty grief.
MARKETABLE: Producing jobs for one's graduates.
MAXIMIZE: To select the best, or what some fool thinks is the best, of the alternatives available.
MAXIMIZE PERFORMANCE: Harrass.
MEANINGFUL: Meaningless.
MEANINGFUL ADVISING: Explained only by contrast. An example of meaningless advising is telling students that the Absolute participates in, but does not undergo, evolution or progress.
MERIT PAY: Paying off troublesome faculty.
METHODS OF TEACHING: Lecture, discussion, harrassment.
MINICOURSE: A course slight in duration and slighter in content.
MINIMIZE: Ignore.
MISVALID ASSUMPTION: A mistake.
MLA: (1) Modern Language Association, (2) Medical Library Association, (3) Metaphysical Lucubraters Association.
MOBILITY LEAVE: Permission to hold down a tenured faculty position while pursuing another career.
MOTIVATION HYGIENE THERAPY: The attempt to keep the minds of faculty clean.
MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: Academic chaos.
MULTIVERSITY: Academic zoo.

N

NEEDS ASSESSMENT: Deciding on the second most important budget item, after salaries.
NERD: An incompetent academic.
NERDBERG: An incompetent academic who devotes his or her energies to having more capable colleagues fired.
NOBLE GAS: The academic vice-president's speeches.
NON-TRADITIONAL DEGREE PROGRAM: A mail-order diploma.
NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: Those who barely finished high school, but attend college because enrollments are low and professors want to keep their jobs.
NORMAL DISTRIBUTION: Percentage of heterosexuals on campus.

O

OBJECTIVE: Biased in accordance with my values.
OMBUDSMAN: Sexist form of ombudsperson.
OPEN FOR COMMENT AND DIALOGUE: We will listen, but we have already made up our minds.
OPPRESSED GROUPS: Women, blacks, hispanics, gays, and anyone else of interest to the professor. Those who think that untenured white males belong in this class are racists, sexists, imperialists, fascists and speciesists.
OPTIMIZE: Maximize realization of objectives by arrang-

ing organizational activities in such a way that they result in an efficient operation. (This is the real stuff.)
OPTIONS: The choice between exploitation and unemployment.
ORGANIZATIONAL: Chaotic.
OVERALL PERFORMANCE CRITERIA: Deciding who is to be axed.
OVERQUALIFIED: What they use to nullify you when all else fails.

P

PARADIGM: Model. For example, the novels of Franz Kafka provide a paradigm for the understanding of the behavior of administrations.
PARAMETERS: Limitations upon teaching and research created by the limited intellectual capacities of students and administrators.
PARAPROFESSIONAL: (1) One who does a professional's work at a much reduced salary, (2) A person charged with eliminating superfluous faculty by the most direct method.
PARENTAL CLIMATE: Harrassment of faculty by ignorant creatures.
PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT: Assuring that many people serve on committees.
PERSEVERANCE OF THE ELECT: Tenure.
PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED: Crippled.
PLAGIARISM: Copying. If more than one source is used, this is called research (see below).
POST-STRUCTURALISM, POST-MODERNISM: Worn-out movements in new guise.
POVERTY, CHASTITY AND OBEDIENCE: Oath taken by lay faculty at Catholic schools.
PRIORITIZATION: Deciding what is important.
PROFESSOR WITH ASPIRATIONS: A sycophantic academic desirous of an administrative position.
PROFICIENCY: Ability to do something — anything.
PROGRAMING: Learning to spout the right opinions on all subjects.
PROJECTION: Thinking that the other person is plotting your downfall.
PUBLISH OR PERISH: Publish and perish anyway.
PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM: Uneventful career with a minor crisis at tenure time.

Q

QUANTIFY: Provide meaningless numbers.
QUARK: Impolite verb.
QUOTA: Measure of success in discrimination.

R

RACISM, SEXISM, IMPERIALISM AND FASCISM: (1)

Used when disagreeing with the speaker on any point,
(2) Any policy of which the speaker disapproves.

RATIONALIZE: What others do to support their false opinions.

REALIST: Someone who can endure the pain of firing a colleague.

REAL WORLD: The world outside the Academy, a scene of cruelty, depravity and injustice (as opposed to the sweetness and light that prevails in our ivied halls).

REPULSIVE FORCE: An administrative demand for a cut in salary or staff.

RESEARCH: The most important word in academe. Students, professors and janitors are all engaged in research.

RESPONSIVE: Easily intimidated.

RETENTION: (1) Keeping students in school (by any means necessary), (2) Graciously omitting to fire junior faculty, (3) Honoring tenure contracts — whatever the pain.

RETRENCH: (1) Fire, (2) Revoke the pension paid to a tenured professor for nominal duties.

RIGHTS: Power.

RIGHT TAIL (of the bell curve): Smart.

RIGOROUS: Trivial.

ROLE AMBIGUITY: (1) A psychological problem common among professors and other actors, (2) Inability to choose among bagels, kaiser rolls and English muffins.

S

SCHOLARLY PAPER: *New York Times*.

SCHOLARLY PROMISE: A strong letter of reference from a powerful academic, however obtained.

SCHOLARSHIP: Footnotes (lots of them).

SEMINAR: Ego session.

SEMIOTICS: A discipline which helps one read signs — billboards, road warnings, menus and signals from the administration.

SOCIOBIOLOGY: A damnable heresy which teaches that our bodies affect our minds.

STAFF PLANNING: Hiring faculty for tenure track positions one does not intend to keep.

STRATEGIC PLAN: A faculty purge.

STRESS MANAGEMENT: Accepting what they are doing to you without going mad.

SYSTEMS APPROACH: A pretense of order.

T

TAXONOMY: Futile attempt to impose order on chaos.

TECHNOSTRESS: My word processor is driving me mad.

TENURE: Early retirement at full pay.

TENURE DENIAL: Firing.

TENURE QUOTA: Institutional framework for a strategic plan.

TERMINAL BEHAVIOR: Behavior resulting in death or tenure denial.

TEST: chance to even the score with your students.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY: (1) The attitude of administrators toward faculty, (2) The attitude of faculty toward administrators.

TOUGH DECISIONS: Nasty decisions which you enjoy making.

TRANSFORMATIONAL GRAMMAR: Turning student papers into English.

TRANSITIONAL: On the way from the frying pan into the fire.

TRILATERAL COMMISSION: The source of all our woes.

U

UNDECIDED: Unsure whether to join a fraternity or a sorority.

UNIVERSITY: (1) An organization for creating obstacles to teaching or research, (2) a college, (3) a vo-tech Institute.

UNMERITED FAVOR: Tenure — which no one deserves, but some do procure.

UNPRECEDENTED VERSATILITY: Lack of principle, extreme even among academics.

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL: A wish and a promise.

V

VALUE-JUDGMENT: Your opponents' unsupported opinions.

VALUES CLARIFICATION: Telling students what to think.

VERBALIZE: Talk.

VISITING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR: A one-year appointment paying poverty wages.

VITAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE: Initiation into the fraternity or sorority of one's choice.

W

WARM AND WONDERFUL PERSON, COMPETENT AND INOFFENSIVE, TRULY OUTSTANDING IN COMMUNITY SERVICE: Mediocre at best.

WARM BOOT: Dismissal with excellent references.

X Y Z

X FACTOR: Unpredictable event affecting one's career. For example, the administration abolishes a position just before you receive a firm offer. ■