

# Passion Through the Profession: Being Both Activist and Academic

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## Introduction

I WRITE THIS ESSAY MORE FOR MYSELF THAN FOR OTHERS, BUT I OFFER IT IN THE HOPES of addressing what I am convinced are common issues that arise with faculty engagement in social justice work. Such work frequently takes the academic out of the classroom into the community to make a difference in the life chances of those who are marginal in our society. These social justice issues typically concern conditions of basic human rights in employment, shelter, nutrition, health, and recreation. This article is an appeal to define the academic role as one that integrates activism and research in response to one's passion. My own experience has been that volunteer community work grows into an activist's commitment to specific social change, from which applied research is then generated. Recognizing the demands that emerge from these commitments will clarify what can be conflicting roles of each.

## The Activist Academic: Responding to Uncontrollable Events

I have been working with a group of committed volunteers to abolish the death penalty since 1987 — first as cofounder, then as president, and now as chair of the fund-raising committee. You can imagine the group's excitement as we heard rumors that Governor George Ryan of Illinois would commute the sentences of at least some of that state's death row prisoners as he was leaving office in January 2003. During the semester holidays, several of us worked feverishly on a news release that would be our response whenever the governor acted. Not certain of the date of his announcement until the week before, we stayed near the phone so as to be available to the media. During this time, we also got word of a Missouri execution scheduled for February 5 and that another one of the prisoners currently on death row<sup>1</sup> was having an unprecedented second *habeas* hearing at the state supreme court on February 4. Each of these events was largely beyond our control and required major efforts to mobilize the community.

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Finally, in the same week that classes began for the new semester, Governor Ryan pardoned four persons and commuted the sentences of 167 others, thereby emptying death row in the State of Illinois. These events happened just as our city began a week of events to celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. A call came from the chair of the local Southern Christian Leadership Conference urging a press conference organized to encourage our governor to follow the lead of Governor Ryan. My hours were consumed coordinating meetings, making phone calls, assigning tasks to volunteers, securing speakers for the press conference, and managing responses from the public.

The following week, the coalition board was meeting and I agreed to conduct the orientation for the new members. It took an entire day to prepare packets of information, so that the meeting itself could be spent reviewing the written material and answering questions.

The next week the death penalty frenzy continued as an earlier planned "Lobby Day" took place at the state capitol on January 29, the interim report for a grant was due January 31, and this article was due February 1. During this time, I was also teaching my classes, attending department meetings, and finishing the revision of another article (Burnett, 2003). The coalition work had taken over too much of my time. Things felt as if they were out of balance. Why was *I* the person to make everything happen? Was it because I was connected with other abolitionists around the state and so it was my responsibility to communicate to those in our local group? Was it because I was on a semester break from teaching my classes, giving the illusion of having "free time," able to attend impromptu meetings? Was it because I was the one who had obtained the grant and needed to be accountable to the funder? I have come to the realization that working with a social movement means going with the flow of events, even when the stream becomes a flood. Because we were all volunteers, I could see the need and chose to respond to preserve the group's responsiveness to current events. I reluctantly asked and gratefully received a four-day extension on this article's deadline. How did I get into this circumstance of being so driven? The demands I seemed unable to resist began with *caring* about the cause, a quality that is well grounded in the sociological enterprise.

### **The Academic Profession as Vocation**

Academics are "people engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge through research and teaching at colleges and universities" (Divinski et al., 1994: 6). Today, the typical academic is expected to be both teacher and researcher, although one's identity may reflect one role more strongly than another. Whatever one's focus, Richard Hall (1969) identifies key attitudinal attributes shared with those who are professionals. Two attributes are particularly relevant for this discussion. The first of these attributes to consider is a sense of calling to the field.

[T]he dedication of the professional to his [*sic*] work and his feeling that he would probably want to continue in the occupation even if fewer extrinsic rewards were available (Hall, 1969: 81–82).

A sense of calling or vocation has an almost mystical feel of being drawn to the subject matter or field of study. Persons choose to major in a particular field, or some could say they are chosen by the field when they review the threads of their life and the intellectual interests that lead to the selection of one's profession. A sense of vocation is an intangible knowing that even if one is denied tenure, one will seek another position rather than change professions. It is not just a job, interchangeable with other means for making a living. Rather, a calling represents an individual's recognition that, despite what others might think, the academic discipline lures one to stay committed to the field of study.

All academics must have particular expertise within their chosen field. Such expertise gives the academic something for which to stand, about which to have a passion. Even the title of "professor" begs the question of what it is that the professor professes. The academic credential provides a platform for one's professing. William DuBois (1997: 50) reminds us that the word "education" from the original Latin means literally "to lead forth." Max Weber (1946: 135) expresses it this way: "For nothing is worthy of man [*sic*] as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion." Frank Lechner (1990: 41) describes the sociologist as one who is "moved by a particular kind of passion." Professing may not be limited to the classroom or to one's colleagues through professional publications. It may be that the community calls forth that expertise in the form of expert testimony or service on a community board of directors. Or perhaps the academic sees a need and responds by being able to make a unique contribution to the social good, to make a difference in the wider society. As a calling, one's expertise permeates one's life and becomes a framework through which to see all of society. In other words, it influences one's involvements and translates into social action.

A second attribute of the professional is a belief in service to the public (Hall, 1969). This attribute is clearly documented in the very development of the profession of sociology. Sociology was birthed in the service of social change. August Comte, who coined the term "sociology," grounded his work in the reform of society "to do away with the unequal distribution of property, power, culture, and happiness" (Thilly, 1940: 505–506). However, over the years, the institutional need for legitimacy and status has eclipsed the social action aspect of the profession. William DuBois (1997) traces the return in each modern generation of sociologists to the "change the world conversation." Thus, sociology has always had a component that is committed to making a difference with research that, at its best asks, as did Robert Lynd (1939), "knowledge for what?" An essential critique of the field has been to point to the encroachment of careerism, publications, and grant writing that results in research that has limited, if any, impact for practical problem solving. Hence, the founding of the Society for the Study of Social

Problems (SSSP) in 1951 was clearly dedicated to solving social problems (Reese, 2001: 152). More generally, complaints about the academic are often in terms of this belief in service to the public: "The American professoriate must restructure its own professional commitments if it is to provide constructive leadership in a changing democracy" (Rice, 1986: 22). Thus, social action is integral to the professional academic and is especially demanding upon the sociologist.

I agree with DuBois who said, "there is no alternative to entering the world. The question is: how?... The knowledge we produce will be used. The question is what types of means and resources will help to build a better world" (1997: 54). Readers of *Social Justice* take for granted this calling to be engaged in service to the wider community. Of course, there are many styles of engagement for the professional. Rather than being separate from one's research agenda, I suggest that one's research should emerge *out of* one's service involvements, that is, follow one's passion and let the research questions surface from the interactions and needs of the participants. Then, as S.M. Miller says, "we should be changed or at least challenged theoretically by our involvement" (2001: 145).

Randy Divinski et al. (1994: 7) defined activist academics as "academics who attempt to integrate their academic and activist identities." For this discussion, I propose that there are four roles that exist in various combinations when considering the relationship between research and social action. My own experience will be used to disentangle these roles and illustrate how the academic role can integrate activism and research as a response to one's passion. In so doing, social change or problem solving becomes the motivation for one's research agenda, which then shifts one's style of activism. No doubt, some academics would argue that maintaining the status quo serves the public good. Their research, focusing on social problems, should also be placed in the public arena for testing and debate, given the academic expectation to expose "one's ideas and findings to the judgment of a community of inquirers" (Lechner, 1990: 46).

### **Disentangling Four Roles of the Professor: Academic, Volunteer, Activist, and Applied Researcher**

#### *The Academic Role*

The expectations for the academic involve various forms of research, teaching, and service. We often hear that academics live in an "ivory tower," implying that their work is not connected to the real world. Obviously, this is an exaggeration, but in it is a kernel of truth. For example, it is not uncommon for research to be dismissed as too theoretical, without any immediate or practical result or, conversely, too narrow, without any significance.

As most junior faculty do, I spent the first several years of my career establishing myself as a scholar by publishing research about elderly offenders, the *nolo contendere* plea, and editorial portrayals of Themis: the mythological symbol

of Justice. In those days, the theme of my research seemed to focus on interdisciplinary and sociological issues of myth and recognizing the real consequences of the law in action. The focus of my service activities involved the university community, with significant participation in departmental, campus, and university-wide committees. The tenure process was a bruising one, prompting me to reevaluate my calling. By the end of this period, through a process of discernment, I named and claimed my own calling to transform the criminal injustice system from its punitiveness to a restorative justice system that values the reintegration of victims, offenders, and community through my vocation of teaching and research. The discernment gave me a new statement of focus that would direct my future endeavors. In reviewing which activities and subjects gave me energy and excitement, I was able to recognize my criminological worldview.

### *The Volunteer Role*

Without noticing what motivated me, I joined the local Amnesty International (AI) group a year or two after I moved to town, and then, when AI began its global campaign to abolish the death penalty in 1986, the group asked me to be the death penalty liaison because I taught criminal justice at the university. Although I did not know anything about the death penalty at the time, agreeing to that task gave a consistency to my teaching and volunteering interests. The timing also made sense given that tenure had been awarded, and I was feeling open to new commitments.

A volunteer is someone who offers time and talent to the project or service at hand, but who is free from external restraints to withdraw that offer at any time. There is usually no pay given for the service, although some may be paid so little for their work that it amounts to volunteering (Kleidman, 1994). The volunteer status implies a level of commitment that is more or less optional for the person and for the group or organization. A volunteer's primary identity is not with the group, for she is in a part-time relationship with the group. In many situations, the volunteer is not performing a particularly unique role, but one that is easily interchangeable with another volunteer.

I began working with a death penalty coalition without intending to do so. Accepting the responsibility to be the AI liaison connected me with the community of abolitionists, great resources, and a vehicle to meet others in my city that were also committed to abolishing the death penalty. I was content to be learning information about the death penalty that I could incorporate into my classes. I joined an abolitionist group that was convened by a priest who served as chaplain in the county jail. When the priest left on a sabbatical, he asked me to be the convener of the group. I agreed, but when he did not return, I made a conscious decision to continue convening this group once a month. The death penalty issue had hooked my sociological imagination and repeatedly demonstrated to me the disparities between the workings of the actual legal system and the ideal justice system.

We were a group of volunteers, and all were busy with other commitments. Few had time to do more than attend a monthly meeting. However, as executions resumed in the state in 1989, the activities increased in frequency and demanded attention. From 1987 until 1995, I led the group out of my university office. Increasingly, I was taking on more administrative activities to connect a growing number of supporters (e.g., initiating Pen Pal programs, producing a monthly newsletter, monitoring legislation, supporting family members with loved ones on death row, giving talks to community groups, holding vigils on the eve of executions, etc.). I hired a student each semester, paid out of my own pocket, to work up to 20 hours each week on the death penalty in order to nurture the budding movement. It was the only way I knew to grow the movement. I was careful to separate death penalty functions from the university and kept track of any incidental copying or long distance telephone calls so that I could reimburse the department. Much of what I was doing was “community housework” (Hubbard, 1996) and reflected many of the ways for academics to contribute to organizing efforts such as being timely, listening to the needs of the community, participating in constructive ways, being familiar with sources that can be mobilized in a political fight, wielding prestige when needed, being creative, assisting grass-roots initiatives, staying on top of coming changes, and looking beyond one’s skills as a researcher (Beckwith, 1996).

As executions mounted, the needs of the cause became more than I could handle and unfortunately, others weren’t jumping in to help. We decided to incorporate as a nonprofit organization with elected officers and a committee structure to share the workload. Because of my commitment to the cause, my administrative capabilities (discovered when I served as department chair from 1987 to 1991), and the relative flexibility in my work schedule, I continued to convene the group and then to serve as president of the coalition when it incorporated. That position made it appropriate that I become the media contact and spokesperson for the group and for the cause. Normally, the media called on the occasion of executions. I identified myself in interviews as president of the coalition, not as university professor of sociology. Not surprisingly, the level of the group’s activity dramatically increased with committees, officers, and a board of directors. Coalition members were now engaging in family support, corresponding with death row prisoners, organizing two public events each year, fund-raising, trying to stop executions, making presentations, and alerting members about pending legislation. I was holding it all together and it felt as if it had become a second job.

Somehow, my participation had changed. I was so committed to the cause that I did not feel free to withdraw my support. Perhaps it was because the group was so closely aligned with my profession, it had a power to hook my commitment and dedication. I did not join that group to do research, but rather I participated to make a difference in the world. I entered the movement when it seemed that the first need was to organize and mobilize. My volunteer participation had evolved

into my becoming a full-fledged activist *who happened to be an academic*. How I would have liked to join an already existing movement with effective leadership and social structures that worked. Instead, I *was* the leadership. When making presentations to public groups, such activity was most consistent with my academic role, although I usually introduced myself as an officer of the coalition rather than as Dr. Burnett. In other respects, the cause devoured much of my time that probably should have been devoted to developing research projects and publications to satisfy the expectations of my academic role. Instead, the students I hired allowed me to do more for the coalition-building activities, such as producing a monthly newsletter and developing a speaker's bureau to respond to community requests for presentations on the death penalty.

### *The Activist Role*

An activist can be a volunteer, in the sense of being unpaid for one's activity. But the distinction between the two turns more on identity and time commitment. The activist is one who advocates for social change and is more likely than the volunteer to take a leadership role or to take responsibility for the social movement's activities. Thus, an activist is a major identity closely connected to a social movement organization.

Due to the death of a member of the board of directors, the death penalty group inherited some money, and we decided to hire a part-time executive director. This hiring really helped me to let go of many administrative responsibilities, most particularly the maintenance of the mailing lists. But with the hiring of staff, I added "supervisor" to my functions as a board member. When the money ran out, the coalition almost fell apart. Volunteers stepped forward to take on the duties on which we had come to rely, but some details just fell through the cracks. I decided not to pick up the pieces. Instead, I resolved to work with a grant-writer to find the necessary money to staff the small organization. My role shifted, signaling a new, and relatively narrow, focus that would permit me to let go of directing the coalition and either let it flounder or let it call out new leadership.

A strength of this coalition is attributed to having in the same group both victims' family members who are against the death penalty and mothers whose sons are on death row. We model our message of reconciliation and unity, and therefore blunt the common criticism of opponents that we ignore the victims. Another strength of the coalition is that we meet in an African-American church whose pastor is prominent in the community. We have worked at training our members to be effective advocates, taking folks to national conferences to empower them by seeing the wider movement in action and meeting others who are in the same struggles they are.

We now have an exonerated former death row prisoner serving on our board of directors. When the personal stories of such a person are shared, proponents of the death penalty are transformed into opponents. The pen pal program gives

witness to this power. The cause touches people. For example, my own experience in corresponding with a death row prisoner transformed the coalition activities from an academic and voluntary activity into a personal and political passion. When, in 1996, I witnessed my pen pal's execution, that experience changed the nature of my involvement with the death penalty abolition movement. The terrible wrongness of the death penalty became a passion that called me to vigorous resistance.

As an activist, I have written letters to the editor and corresponded with governors. I was elected by the members of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP) to serve as an affiliate representative on the NCADP board of directors from 1998 to 2000. My activities also included membership in the statewide abolition group that meets quarterly to coordinate statewide efforts. Always in front of me was the goal of empowering others to take leadership roles and of learning about resources to strengthen our cause. The greatest success was in the gradual development of the mother of a death row prisoner from an embarrassed, ashamed victim into serving as the president of the coalition. That transformation involved intense personal support and continual reassurance that I was available for advice and encouragement. For the group's sake and for my own sake, my daily involvement in the coalition diminished. I focused on writing grants to support the coalition activities and writing about witnessing an execution, which first found outlet in a religious publication (Burnett, 1996). I found that experiences offending my sense of justice motivated my need to share them with public audiences outside the system. So, challenging the attorney general's outrageous statements about death row prisoners led to my critical inquiry of frivolous prisoner lawsuits (Burnett, 1998). Rather than relating directly to the work of the death penalty coalition, these writings were initiated by experiences within the movement that raised critical questions about the legal process.

The activist role is one that emerges from personal experience and engagement with the cause. The passion lured me into action. The role developed over time and with experience and perseverance, my authority and reputation grew. Additionally, the grounding provided by the university affiliation cannot be minimized. The university offers a location of credibility that enabled me to be the critic, offers flexibility enabling me to respond to community requests, and offers resources to utilize when expertise needs support.

Unfortunately, success in the development of the movement means greater demands for activism. When the needs of the cause are so great, it becomes stressful to juggle the academic and the activist role. It is imperative for the academic to remember that one's primary identity is the professional academic one. One of the challenges for the activist comes in recognizing that participating in such a cause means that you must be prepared to last for the long haul. This perspective is particularly important for seeing beyond the growing pains of a social movement. In the case of the death penalty group, tensions are often generated

between attorneys' needs and the needs of the coalition. For example, there were times when an attorney may have wanted to avoid publicity about a case, believing that less media attention would permit the governor to do the right thing and commute the prisoner's death sentence. The coalition believed that such a view reflected a naiveté about the political realities of the clemency process.<sup>2</sup> From the coalition's point of view, each pending execution should be given the most media attention possible. Keeping controversy in the public eye is a strategy for recruiting other supporters; providing understanding of the justice issues in the case is a way to develop grass-roots support for the abolition cause. Despite these potential conflicts, the death penalty coalition made a commitment to work *with* attorneys in clemency situations.

### *The Applied Researcher Role*

Activists may become so involved in doing social action that they neglect their academic responsibilities of reflection and writing about the social problems areas in which they are working. Yet activism, at its best, brings a natural transition to applied research that can give fullness to the academic profession.

Applied sociology is concerned with viable action and solutions to social problems. The long sociological tradition in community research and participant observation (Lofland, 1971) has usually taken the form that the researcher goes into a group or a movement to study rather than to change them (Uzzell, 1979). Difficult as it is, gaining access is always the first problem to solve. A researcher who has an activist relationship with the coalition has no problem in developing trust and openness. After years of stuffing envelopes or assembling newsletters, the activist is a trusted member of the group. Without this entree, an applied researcher enters the community typically via an invitation to be employed for a purpose related to her expertise. Thus, the researcher lends her expertise to others in various ways, such as giving expert testimony at legislative hearings, announcing research in a press conference organized by the cause, responding to a grant solicitation, conducting evaluation research, or designing a program to serve the community or agency. As reform recommendations or reports to leadership, these traditional forms of applied research may perpetuate the status quo.

An alternate model for the applied researcher is to be intentional about seeking and developing research interests out of one's activism. After serving in the organization, the sociologist begins to ask what unique contribution can be made to the social movement to bring about social change. One's academic responsibilities inevitably shift one's teaching approach, such that it embraces social action; one's research will yearn to express that which one is discovering. Thus, a commitment to social action and solutions will lead to challenges to the status quo. We should not be ashamed of having a perspective since all research is done from some perspective. Methodological problems arise when the researcher is unaware of, or does not acknowledge, her perspective.

By proceeding “as if” values have been (or ever could be) purged, positivist social scientists leave unrecognized and unaccounted for the values that — despite the fiction of neutrality — continue to define and animate our research (Ewick, 2001: 22).

Thus, the academic researcher must be self-aware, identifying one’s assumptions and theoretical orientation to give the reader a basis for evaluation. Once examined, the research perspective becomes self-conscious conviction. Such awareness brings the confidence and assurance that is a mark of the professional. Objectivity, then, is “being committed to see things as they are — not to falsify data” (DuBois, 1997: 57).

My experience of witnessing the execution of a condemned friend was the catalyst for reinvigorating my research and writing. The first thing I published after the execution described the experience for a general audience. As a result of disseminating that article, other Missouri witnesses were able to prepare themselves for the experience. Yet the offensiveness of the execution experience prompted me to critically question the state’s protocol, which required research to answer. Among the questions were whether the Missouri protocol was unique in its coercive control of witnesses and how witnesses functioned to legitimate the execution process. An article in a refereed journal resulted from that inquiry (Burnett, 2002a).

Through coalition efforts to stop executions, connections with post-conviction attorneys developed over the years. Their dedication to the legal process was steadfast despite the mounting executions. We shared our frustrations with the non-responsiveness of the legal system. The execution of the 39th person in Missouri after reinstatement (whose case for innocence was particularly strong) compelled me to write a book that would expose the flaws in the system and raise the questions that we had been living with for a decade (Burnett, 2002d). From my experience with the abolitionists, I knew that how I communicated was critical to my message. My task in writing the book was to simplify and clarify the complicated death penalty legal process so that the uninformed would understand what was happening. Thus, my connections with lawyers and the execution process prompted my book on clemencies. The research set out to collect all the clemency petitions (totaling 50 by the end of the writing) presented to the governor. After two years of research, I was ready to write the book. Fortunately, the university granted me a research leave to complete the project. That year turned me into a book writer, with the desire to maintain the discipline to continue intensive writing. It also enabled me to further detach myself from the daily death penalty work, allowing the coalition to function and grow without me.

The published book has led to many opportunities for coalition organizing efforts. Book signings, radio talk shows, presentations before diverse groups, and press conferences all do double duty in describing the research and fostering discussion of the issues surrounding the death penalty. My book research led to

other opportunities to publish my research (Burnett, 2001; 2002b; 2003). The law librarian who knew of my interests let me know about a special issue planned for the law review on the topic of innocence, so I submitted an article that was accepted (2002c). That article used the data I had collected for the book, but developed a legal argument suggesting that the concept of innocence incorporates a spectrum of understandings and legal defenses, all of which are legitimate and should be more fully explored. I am beginning work on another project that grows out of friendships I made in the coalition with former death-row prisoners. Through these relationships, I learned that the state provides no compensation for individuals who have been exonerated and released from death row. I wish to argue for a restorative justice response to this social problem.

At its best, applied research meets the test of the profession when the results become an impetus for implementation of new programs or approaches designed to facilitate social change. My research is making a difference. I have learned that the book is being cited in legal briefs filed in post-conviction appeals. A major point of the book is that the clemency process is not an effective remedy, contrary to the belief of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Rehnquist in *Herrera v. Collins* (1993). Post-conviction attorneys are making my argument before appeals courts, arguing that relying on clemency to prevent miscarriages of justice is not without problems and the courts must intervene before relinquishing the matter to the executive office. Other opportunities to disseminate my research come more slowly. In fall 2002, my participation in a book-signing event at the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty led to an invitation to a symposium sponsored by the Texas Forum on Civil Liberties and Civil Rights in 2003.

Rather than doing the research and letting the results speak for themselves, applied researchers must pay attention to the dissemination of findings since those who are challenged may co-opt them or the media may misrepresent them. Skepticism of the status quo by the activist-researcher requires that careful attention be paid to the dissemination and interpretation of applied research results.

My professional journey has revealed how to support the cause of abolition by offering my unique skills and talents. I recognize that my contribution may be of benefit only in the long haul. Yet, the short-term coalition demands continue to be a strong impetus for involvement.

### **Role Conflicts and University Structural Support**

UMKC's College of Arts and Sciences has "Guidelines for Faculty Engagement" that are formed around the traditional areas of teaching, research, and service. These categories are not without ambiguity. In one document, service is understood as "those activities essential for the University to fulfill its primary responsibilities of teaching and scholarship, including service on system-wide, campus-wide, college, and departmental committees (Addendum, 2003: 5). However, the department is contemplating a broader understanding of service, as seen

in the Service Mission section of an internal document: "Faculty members live their professions and consequently translate their expertise to help the community" (Performance, 2003: 7). Thus, where community partnerships are encouraged, it is often not clear whether such activity counts in the university's reward structure as service or as research. Serving on a state's board of probation and parole, for example, could be an activity that stems from one's professional expertise and commitments, just as serving on a journal's editorial board does. Serving on a department's hiring committee, on the other hand, is probably a function of one's personality and willingness.

Likewise, research is "broadly construed, and includes, but is not limited to: applied research within constituent communities; development, implementation, and evaluation of programs within constituent communities, etc." (Addendum, 2003: 5). In another document, research includes "extensive community partnerships, which is one dimension of [the university's] urban mission for the 21st Century" (Performance, 2003: 3). Without ignoring teaching, universities usually reward publishing research more highly than they do teaching in the form of pay raises and promotion.

The fundamental problem for the activist academic is to find a way for social justice work to fit within the university's evaluation system. Is it research (as measured by refereed publications) or is it service? Until recently, I have been falling short of expectations in the research area, the area that is most highly rewarded by the university. The grants I acquired for the coalition did not count as research grants, had no overhead captured by the university, and were not submitted through the university's bureaucracy. As a result, it was as if I had never secured external funding at all. Some of my publications were not in refereed journals and so did not count as academic activity. Although I have received community recognition over the years, I have received none from the university. Perhaps the political controversy surrounding the death penalty issue means that appearing to condone my work with these *particular* community partnerships would jeopardize the institutional connections with the university funders. I have been told that at least one of my colleagues did not receive a local grant because of my activism. Ironically, now with the publication of and significant publicity about my book, the university is satisfied with my research activities. Unfortunately, the book was published in a year in which no pay raises were given.

I am convinced that merging activist and academic roles depends upon the relative freedom that is earned with tenure. The activist-academic must make choices all the time: meet a class or be on the radio? Finish writing an article or watch a Supreme Court hearing? Be available to reporters about a pending execution or participate in a vigil against an execution? One's choices are made with knowledge of what activity is rewarded by the university. Ideally, tenure permits the activist academic to be engaged despite few rewards.<sup>3</sup> One's own definition of success may go beyond what the university has to offer.

### Discussion

I began this article by discussing two attributes of a professional — that of calling and that of public service — to suggest that academics, and sociologists in particular, are obliged to make a difference in the lives of the marginalized, to be advocates for those who have no voice, to be “inventors of solutions” to social problems (DuBois, 1997). Others are urging this same value commitment. “Activism can strengthen our research rather than undermine its validity, and that inquiry can benefit activism rather than frustrate it” (Munger, 2001: 9). The sociological enterprise by its nature and tradition is clearly situated to make significant contributions to problem solving and social policymaking.

In this article, I have tried to illustrate how activism strengthened my research, giving a clear focus to my academic calling. As my volunteerism developed into activism, I gained access to resources that are very difficult to develop without personal connections. After 10 years in the trenches, I began to have something to say on the topic through my particular academic skills. I was known and respected throughout the community as an activist to abolish the death penalty, attracting both speaking opportunities and others who offered to contribute to my work (such as the law librarian). Personal connections with death row prisoners gave me the urgency and compassion to sustain my commitment. My prolonged participation and activism (as in witnessing an execution) gave me credibility and the ability to speak with authority.

An applied sociologist needs to be a bridge between the insights resulting from academic research on social issues and the problems that plague the community. The applied researcher can integrate the academic and activist roles, resulting in improved teaching and research. Without integrating these activities, the faculty member is condemned to dart between two worlds, never at rest, never at one’s best. Each academic must learn to balance these roles in their lives. Such self-discovery is a journey that may take years and involve continual self-assessment. My classroom teaching illustrates my own evolution and attempts to integrate my activist and academic commitments. For example, in 1995, I developed a course on the death penalty, bringing together my research, activism, and teaching interests. Over the years, the course has come to emphasize pending state cases that inform my research, rather than abstract legal doctrine. Further, the course invites students to do their own action-reflection through involvement in a death penalty case currently before the U.S. Supreme Court or through involvement in a bill pending in the state legislature. In this sense, teaching becomes a form of activism (Keys, 2001: 150).<sup>4</sup>

If the academic participates in an already ongoing movement with established leadership, one’s role can remain contained — a committee assignment with some limited tasks to complete and fold into one’s life. This has not been my experience. When a movement is just being birthed, the academic role blurs with the activist role. Such commitment is a calling and a living out of one’s values with integrity.

However, because the academic comes with a package of skills that are useful to a movement's existence, there is a danger of being looked to for leadership — either as an expert or as an administrator. The danger lies in accepting the unspoken expectation to “do it all.” Effective social change depends on grass-roots organizing and mobilizing strategic people to effect change. One person can rarely effect change. Making a difference, or communicating with audiences not previously reached, are all good things. It is also necessary to equip folks to be advocates, empowering non-experts to take a stand.

The challenge is how to juggle the multiple roles and responsibilities. For example, if one is able to teach a course in the subject area corresponding to one's passion for social justice, then office time spent engaged in movement support can be counted as classroom preparation. The course is richer because it is informed by serving the movement (e.g., delivering a community lecture or serving as an expert witness). Unfortunately, this movement toward unity of activities cannot be rushed. It is dependent upon the needs of the movement and of the curriculum. The academic must be aware of these potential tensions and finesse the merging of these roles.

Ultimately, balancing roles requires a centered individual, one who is aware of temptations to take on too much. Academics are very capable, so there is much we can do. Nevertheless, choices must be made. I have found it helpful to pause before accepting a new task and to consider whether I would be willing to give up something else to do the new task. I have also begun to schedule blocks of time for writing at a retreat center that is away from the distractions of home and phone. All sorts of good things come up to do, but one must be ruthless in turning down those invitations in order to stay committed to research and writing.

Finally, it is important to think lightly of oneself and one's power to effect change. Success is not all on any individual's shoulders, but rather depends on the development of a team that is ready to respond when the winds of current events favor the chosen movement. Activism often occurs over a long haul and sometimes does not “succeed” in the individual's lifetime (e.g., the suffrage movement lasted over 70 years before resulting in the right to vote for women). The status quo is not easily changed. Those who make a difference are the ones who hang in for the long haul. Tiny successes along the way must be celebrated to sustain individual and collective commitment to the movement. With every exoneration, we celebrate. With every commutation, we celebrate. With every stay or reversal, we celebrate. With every increase in the number of demonstrators, we celebrate. With every sympathetic movement in the legislature, we celebrate. With increasing numbers attending conferences, we celebrate. With each successful grant application, we celebrate.

In summary, the life of the academic is enriched, enhanced, and fulfilled by the application of research to actual social change. Applied research that grows out of committed activism enlivens the classroom as an arena of relevance. By

being intentional about the dynamic between teaching, research, and service the ivory tower can have its doors open and move into the hearts of academic-activists who live meaningfully at the intersection of passion and vocation. The activist academic is a way of life — being and doing, action and reflection, teaching and research, theory and practice.

## NOTES

1. Joe Amrine's story is available on a 52-minute documentary video that lays out his claims of actual innocence. It is available at [www.reasonabledoubt.com](http://www.reasonabledoubt.com). See [www.pilc.net/](http://www.pilc.net/) for more on the case. Mr. Amrine was released from custody on July 23, 2003.
2. This political observation may not be accurate. A public opinion poll in 1999 of a random sample of Missourians indicates that persons will not likely change their votes if the candidate has an opinion differing from the voter.
3. See Etzkowitz (1988) for a study on how the university does not tolerate dissent.
4. However, the challenge for the teacher is to bend over backwards to permit differences of opinion on the topic, and to present both sides of the issue in a balanced and fair way. For the activist, the challenge is to understand your opponents and to recognize their values.

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