

The Ladder to Success in Universities

William Van Til

The essence of the idea for my column was suggested to me by the versatile creator of J. Abner Peddiwell, PhD. He has graciously allowed me to borrow Peddiwell. As I wrote this column, I grew ever more grateful for the loan, unlike the unappreciative Herbert and the anthropologist. I would like to lunch one of these days at the Explorers Club with Herbert and the anthropologist and some distinguished educator, Harold Benjamin, for instance, to discuss whether or not this Peddiwell is a fundamentally sound man. Meanwhile you may judge for yourself, as the anthropologist tells Herbert about Peddiwell's theories on climbing the ladder to success in universities.

THE anthropologist looked disturbed as he sank into his favorite leather chair at the Explorers Club. He stared into the roaring blaze in the great stone fireplace. From the paneled walls, masks used in primitive ceremonials stared down unblinkingly.

Herbert, a fellow club member, eased his frame into the leather chair beside him. The anthropologist continued to look broodingly into the fireplace. Herbert decided to make conversation.

"How is your study of the remarkable culture of the American Educators coming along?" asked Herbert.

"Oh, hello," said the anthropologist. "Quite well, thank you. Till today."

"Yes?" said his companion encouragingly.

"You remember," said the anthropologist, "that I was studying the class structure of the American Educators. Educational class structure, that is. I set down the characteristics of the five identifiable classes: the grave and learned uppers, the gregarious upper-middles, the expense-accountless lower-middles, the garden variety upper-lowers who are the backbone of the tribe, and the lower-lowers with their peculiar slogan, 'Friday, thank God!' My researches dealt with considerations of occupational status and social mobility. My studies led me into related fields. Recently I have been investigating the ladder to success in universities. That is where I encountered a difficulty today."

"Why should that prove difficult?" asked Herbert. "The ladder to success in universities seems plain. On the bottom rung of the ladder is the overworked, underpaid graduate assistant. This lowly fellow tabulates statistics, teaches courses no one else wants to teach, marks papers, takes graduate work, and wrestles with his dissertation."

Musingly, the anthropologist interjected, "The last form off legalized slavery remaining in the United States."

"Naturally," said Herbert. "The next rung up the ladder is the instructor. Then assistant professor. Then associate professor. Then full professor. Then dean or president. With each step up, the individual gains in status, salary, tenure. Such is the university ladder to success, heartily endorsed by all and climbed by many."

"That's what I thought too," said the anthropologist gloomily. "Until today."

Herbert waited. He wished he could get over the apprehensive feeling that the primitive masks on the walls were exchanging glances.

"Today", continued the anthropologist, "I met Professor J. Abner Peddiwell, Ph.D., Petaluma College."

"And what did Peddiwell say?"

Peddiwell Offers Suggestions

"This Dr. Peddiwell is an extraordinarily logical man," said the anthropologist, "as readers of his Saber-Tooth Curriculum know. So I listened with strict attention to his suggestions for improvements on the ladder to success.

"Dr. Peddiwell said to me, 'Let us take, for example, an eager young man, dewy fresh from graduate courses, inexperienced, and anxious to be a staff member of a university. What should be his first post? With his inexperience, it should be a position in which he can do the least possible harm. So his contacts with students and classes should be strictly limited. His opportunities to engage in research and scholarship should be few. He should learn to do many routine, unpleasant chores about the university and thus learn the complexities of the university world.'"

"That sounds sensible," said Herbert. "What is the title of this post for the beginner which Peddiwell so well describes?"

"Dean," said the anthropologist gloomily. "Peddiwell believes that every young staff member should begin as a dean of a college. He believes there is no other post in which a individual has fewer contacts with classes and students, fewer opportunities for research and scholarship, more routine, unpleasant chores, and more opportunity to appreciate Fred Allen's universal law. "

"I'm afraid I don't follow that last, said Herbert apologetically. "That matter of Fred Allen's law."

"Peddiwell says that Fred Allen has discovered the only universal law: 'Things are more complicated than most people think'."

"But if there aren't enough deanships to go around for all the young men."

"Make them presidents," said the anthropologist tersely.

"Then after a few years as dean or president?"

"Promote them to full professorships: Full professors, as you know, usually are men in their later years who work with advanced graduate students in highly theoretical courses. This will be an ideal post for a man in his late twenties, Peddiwell urges. With his own advanced graduate courses only a few years behind him, the young full professor will be an impeccable master of theory which will be unpolluted by practical experience. These young professors will be literally full professors--full of knowledge and panting eagerness to share their own graduate lecture course notes with advanced students. Thus cultural lag will be reduced."

"Then with maturity," surmised Herbert, "the full professor is promoted to an associate professorship. Later the associate professor is promoted to an assistant professorship."

Dissertation After Retirement

"Right," said the anthropologist. "Finally, as a recognition for distinguished service, the university staff member in his (or her) mellow later years may climb to the top rung on the university ladder to success. He will achieve promotion from assistant professor to instructor. All of his matured teaching skills, his ripe knowledge of human beings, his mellow distilled wisdom can be used with large numbers of young undergraduates. He has finally become ready for this most difficult form of teaching. Eventually the old instructor reaches retirement age. Known, heard, beloved by the entire student body, he gracefully withdraws from active service. Then he proceeds to write his doctoral dissertation."

"What!" said Herbert. "Would Peddiwell have him delay his dissertation till after retirement?"

"Yes, indeed," said the anthropologist. "He says that too many dissertations are written before the authors are ready to say anything really significant. There are hurried through so that the young student may receive his union card, a diploma enabling him to teach in the university. How much better, urges Peddiwell, to have the dissertation prepared as the final fruit of a distinguished career. Prepared unhurriedly during the long years of retirement that stretch before him; prepared by a seasoned scholar, thoroughly familiar with his sources, library and laboratory. The result: a dissertation respected and read and used by his colleagues, rather than a youthful effort gathering mold in the dusty stacks."

Herbert said, "The mortality rate would cut down on the number of dissertations, too, a distinct gain. But in this series of promotions, from dean or president to student, how about salary? How about the tenure granted to full and associate professors and withheld from assistant professors and instructors?"

"Peddiwell has considered that, too," said the anthropologist wearily. "He said to me, 'When does a man (or woman) most need a president's, a dean's, a full professor's salary? Obviously, when he is a young man in his twenties, furnishing his home, rearing his young children, paying their doctor bills, engaging in a young man's extravagancies. When could he afford to live on an instructor's salary, or on a pension while he writes his dissertation? Obviously, in his declining years when worldly desires for material goods are least, when his children have left the nest, when he contentedly looks across the living room at his serene old wife knitting by the fireside. Similarly,' says Peddiwell, 'when does a man most need the protection of tenure laws? During the fiery idealistic days of his youthful fervor or the quiet reflective days of his later years? To ask the question is to answer it.'"

There followed a long silence which Herbert broke. "Unfortunately, I can see nothing wrong with J. Abner Peddiwell's theory of an improved ladder to success in universities," said Herbert.

"Unfortunately, neither can I," said the anthropologist.

They both sat staring gloomily into the blaze in the great stone fireplace. On the walls, the masks used in primitive ceremonials exchanged winks.

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