

## The academic life: small worlds, different worlds

**The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds**, by Burton R. Clark,  
Princeton, NJ, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1987

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*The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds* represented an impressive investigation of the largest and most complex national academic community in the world, which seriously attempted a detailed representation of the variations in its form. Its ethnographic orientation to understanding the internal academic life through exploratory interviews with individual faculty in different types of institution and a range of disciplines provided subtle and complex insights. The strength of its subsequent influence on scholars in this field, however, may have restricted analysis of broader transformations in higher education and society and the related restructuring of academic work and careers.

**Keywords:** Burton R. Clark; *The Academic Life*; US faculty; academic profession; academic calling; case study approach

### Introduction

Although I never met Burton Clark, I have talked to many scholars who knew, worked with or were influenced by him. Some were students of his, such as Gary Rhoades, now General Secretary of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). He was one of three research associates in the study on which *The Academic Life* is based. Others, like Clark himself, are pre-eminent scholars of the American academic profession, such as Martin Finkelstein, from Seton Hall University in New Jersey. Professor Finkelstein is one of the US colleagues involved with me in the international study of the *Changing Academic Profession* (CAP).

Last November, I attended the Annual Conference of the American Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) in Vancouver just days after Clark's death. During the pre-Conference International Forum, Amy Scott Metcalfe from the University of British Columbia, who is Co-Chair of the International Division of ASHE (and another CAP colleague), organised a session for delegates to remember Clark and his contribution to the study of higher education. A number of participants, including Gary Rhoades, spoke very movingly – and emotionally – of Clark's influence on their, and others', work. In the main conference, in inimitable American style, there was a 'memorial breakfast', to honour colleagues who had 'passed' during the previous 12 months and to share stories and raise a toast to 'these beloved friends of ASHE'. Inevitably, Bob Clark was significant among those remembered.

In talking and listening to these colleagues, I obtained the distinct impression that Clark was a gentleman scholar – humble and not that interested in promoting himself. He was a sociologist of organisations first, and became interested in higher education as a particular field of the study of organisations.

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## The genesis of the book

In writing *The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds* (1987), I wanted to show the vast differences between academic life in the universities, the small liberal arts colleges, and the community colleges. The book also pointed to the fundamental differences *within* universities, e.g., between life in the medical school and in the humanities departments. (Clark 2008, 305–6)

Clark's interest in the study of American faculty was rekindled by a four-day international seminar in 1984 which discussed the academic profession across nations, disciplines and universities (Clark 2008, 279). The national settings included Britain, Germany, France and the United States, with a Columbia University historian, Walter Metzger, providing a historical account of the substantive growth of the US academy (Metzger 1987). This led to the publication in 1987 of a volume of the essays developed for, during and after the seminar, edited by Clark entitled, *The Academic Profession: National, Disciplinary and Institutional Settings* (Clark 1987c). Clark also contributed the concluding chapter to this volume in which he reflected on the 'major axes of differentiation' (Clark 1987a, 372) analysed by the other contributors, the nature of academic authority, the internal integration of the profession and its integration with society and, finally, the strain between differentiation and integration. He contrasted the competitive dynamism and increasing differentiation of US institutions and faculty with the relative unity of the academic professions in Britain and continental Europe. Nevertheless, even in the US, he found some bonds of a common professional identity in the membership of faculty to their disciplines and institutions and in their shared understandings of what it is to be an academic. 'In the many there remain signs of the one', he wrote (Clark 1987a, 397).

According to Clark, this earlier edited volume 'Helped to establish certain basic features of the American system and its resident profession, whose importance might otherwise have been overlooked or underestimated' (Clark 1987b, xxiii). Before the seminar, Clark thought he had lost touch with what was happening with faculty in the US because he had been concentrating so much on other countries (Clark 2008). Both he and Ernest Boyer, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, wanted to know more about the US academic profession. Boyer undertook a national survey of faculty (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1984) and the Foundation provided a generous three-year grant to Clark and his research team to undertake intensive, largely qualitative, fieldwork. The differences in methodologies chosen by the two scholars were stark:

We greatly benefited from intensive face-to-face prolonged interviews, especially when respondents elaborated on their contradictory feelings that could not be explained in checkmark questionnaires. I became convinced more than ever that researchers who do not delve into job-based differences within academia fall into misleading, simple-minded stereotypes. (Clark 2008, 306)

## Clark on method

Throughout his career, it was Clark's approach – and, in particular, his qualitative, context-defined methodology – that was key to his influence. However, his was not a one-dimensional approach. He combined intensive interviewing with quantitative data and the results of extensive surveys. But, in *The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds*, published in 1987, Clark relied mainly on the 170 faculty interviews carried out in six disciplines in 16 universities and colleges. This was because, for Clark, interviews 'flesh out meanings that often remain ambiguous or hidden in the statistical results of surveys where, on broad issues, individuals have only the chance to offer hypothetical responses to prescribed scenarios' (Clark 1987b, xxvi).

He continued in *The Academic Life*:

No one method of social inquiry is ideal. The approach of open-ended field interviewing on which I rely is deficient in its inability to demonstrate representativeness and in its loose control of bias in

deciding what will be reported. But it is better to suffer the slings of such selection than the sorrows of superficial responses that inhere when respondents answer mail questionnaires by simply checking boxes or circling numbers opposite prepared answers, unable to explain what they individually mean, or say what is really uppermost in their minds. Analysis based on recorded conversations gives respondents a fuller, more intense role. I have quoted them extensively. (Clark 1987b, xxvi)

And, indeed, the core of the book’s analysis was peppered with the voices of these respondents – and four vignettes drawn from other authors – illustrating Clark’s arguments, but also extending, elaborating and contextualising them in ways that would not have been possible from the single perspective of a ‘third person’. ‘Context matters, and immediate context matters a great deal’ (Clark 1987b, 280).

Indeed, as Clark wrote in an appendix to the book on ‘Research focus and procedures’, he purposely avoided looking at external forces that might shape the academic profession, such as demographic and economic trends. He was more interested in ‘the response tendencies of institutions, and the capacity of academics to stay the course, filtering and reshaping outside forces as they play upon the system’ (Clark 1987b, 280). He was also aware of another major study of the ‘professoriate’ in preparation that would explore economic issues (Bowen and Schuster 1986).

In *The Academic Life*, Clark argued that academic life in the US was defined by two key factors: institutional type and discipline. He maintained that, in the mid-1980s, if you knew the institution and discipline of an academic you could tell much about the circumstances, career history and academic life of that individual. In a sense, he was describing a matrix in which each cell represented a distinctive variation on the academic role (see Figure 1).

The book explored first the institutional axis, following the evolution of the colonial colleges into the array – or even, disarray – of universities and colleges numbering around 3000 by the mid-1980s. By doing so, Clark set out the historical and systemic foundations of the 7–800,000-strong American academic profession.

But this was only half the story. For the growth and dispersion of knowledge, beginning in the nineteenth century, whereby ‘general subjects gave birth to a host of specialized disciplines’ (Clark 1987b, xxvi) produced the other, disciplinary, axis. Together, this institutional and disciplinary diversity, driven by the intense competition for scholars and students, produced a

	Physical sciences	Biological sciences	Social sciences	Humanities	‘Hard’ professional	‘Soft’ professional
Private universities						
Doctoral-granting universities						
Comprehensive universities & colleges						
Liberal arts colleges						
Community colleges						
Specialised institutions						

Figure 1. Clark’s institutional–disciplinary matrix.

form of competitive disorder. Huge, decentralised and under both public and private forms of control, this competition gave rise to unplanned hierarchies of status that deeply affected academic life. As Clark concluded the first part of his book: 'An odd stage is set for a profession' (Clark 1987b, xxvii).

### The dimensions of academic professionalism

The core of empirical analysis in the book was to be found in the five chapters that made up Part 2, 'The dimensions of academic professionalism':

- The imperatives of academic work.
- The enclosures of culture.
- The grip of authority.
- The promises of career.
- The ties of association.

*The Imperatives of Academic Work* described the daily duties and practices of academic life and, in particular, the different combinations of research, teaching and service. At the top of the institutional hierarchy Clark found 'virtual think-tank settings' in the research-driven universities. At the bottom, there were very nearly secondary school conditions almost entirely given over to teaching. Throughout this spectrum, however, he noted, 'faculty workload' was immediately translated as 'teaching load', whereas 'research load' was not part of the lexicon. This, according to Clark, 'speaks volumes about the conflicting duties, incentives, and preferences found in the American professoriate' (Clark 1987b, 73).

The greatest paradox of academic work in the mid-1980s, for Clark, was that most professors taught most of the time, and only a minority were significantly involved in research, but that it was the latter that was most valued by the system as a whole. 'The resulting hierarchy of prestige sets in motion the "upward" competitive clamouring of professors and institutions' (Clark 1987b, 99).

In elaborating the disciplinary specification of academic work, Clark explored the distinction between professional schools and, what he called, 'the letters and science departments'. For Clark, 'Professional schools stretch the academic system by differentiating and proliferating the roles of faculty-level personnel: into both clinical and scholarly, part-time and full-time, nontenured and tenured, and outside-based and inside-committed' (Clark 1987b, 96). In this way he presaged some of the fractures that would become even more significant in the two decades following the publication of *The Academic Life*.

*The Enclosures of Culture* told of the affiliations that professors had with their disciplines and professional fields. But these, too, were tied to type of institution, so that 'a community college teacher is virtually compelled to see academic life differently from the scholar in a leading liberal arts college or a university' (Clark 1987b, xxvii). These institutional fractures militated against shared disciplinary and professional ideals.

However, they did not completely fragment the profession. Clark was at pains to argue that, despite relentless specialisation and institutional differentiation there was an 'overlapping of meanings' (Clark 1987b, xxviii) and an 'interlocking of communities' (Clark 1987b, 141) which produced a kind of cultural integration. In arguing this residual unity, Clark was particularly influenced by Tony Becher's thinking about the cultural shaping of the academic profession, which was simultaneously 'the one and the many' (Clark 1987c, 7). Becher had contributed to the earlier collection of essays, writing about the ways in which disciplines attracted and initiated new recruits, the nature of social interaction within a field, forms of specialisation and movements across subject boundaries. In particular, Clark alighted on the 'intangible bonds of identity

and morality' (Clark 1987b, 9) formed during the 'common socialization to scientific, scholarly, and university-rooted norms which [sic] occurs during graduate training' (Clark 1987b, 8).

Clark introduced the vivid imagery of fish scales overlapping to illustrate the 'continuous texture of narrow specialities' (Clark 1987b, 142). This overlapping, in turn, helped to shape the profession. For example, 'Academic drift – the unguided imitative convergence of universities and colleges upon the most prestigious forms – has an enormous cultural component' (Clark 1987b, 143).

*The Grip of Authority* specified the disciplinary and institutional bases of academic authority even as this was being challenged by strengthened bureaucracy and increased state intervention. 'In this fractured profession control varies widely' (Clark 1987b, xxviii). Here, the institutional dimension was the major factor. Where academic authority was dependent on peers, as in the research universities, it was strong. As it became increasingly dependent on students and clientele demands, including those of administrators, it was weakened. In response to this weakening, the degree and influence of unionisation grew, where lawful.

As one moves up the status hierarchy, one encounters more professional control, and as one moves down, one observes more administrative dominance and even autocracy. (Clark 1987b, 161)

The disciplinary shaping of authority occurred within this institutional framework, depending on the prestige of the discipline and the status of the department. Again, Clark distinguished between the departments of letters and science, on the one hand, and professional schools on the other. Given their practical orientation, professional schools – and especially medical schools – were likely to be more managerial and hierarchical.

*The Promises of Career* described segmented and complicated career patterns within the profession. The numerous fault lines, as Clark put it, 'between research careers and teaching careers; between the academic and the clinical; between the permanent and the temporary; between the full-time and the part-time' (Clark 1987b, xxviii). Here, although discipline was 'compelling in fashioning academic careers' and 'competitive mobility' between institutions was a tenet of American higher education, Clark argued 'the initial location is an important differentiator: It assigns an academic to a career line in a type of institution that may be hard to shake' (Clark 1987b, 188).

Disciplines may vary in the patterns of attraction and recruitment, and in the possibilities for midcareer entry, for example. But it was the institutional hierarchy that determined the degree of disciplinary specialisation, the extent of use of contingent faculty, the pace and direction of career progression experienced by individual academics and their sense of satisfaction and solace.

Here, one may criticise Clark. For, although part-timers made up one third of the American academic profession in the mid-1980s, his study did not seek to fully represent their experience of academic life. Only a few were interviewed; and other than this, the researchers relied on their full-time colleagues for evidence (Clark 1987b, 205). Yet, in community colleges, over half (56%) of the instructors were part-timers by 1980 (Cohen and Brawer 1982, cited in Clark 1987b, 88), and so the academic life in this sector could be said to be significantly under-represented in the book. However, the author still felt able to pronounce that part-time work in community colleges 'represents the extreme point in the attenuation of both disciplinary and institutional connections, leaving the academic worker relatively rootless' (Clark 1987b, 88).

Finally, *The Ties of Association* explored the formal and quasi-formal networks between academics across institutions and states. Some were located entirely inside higher education, others originated from outside, located in the major domains of professional practice, such as the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association. These associations – and the more informal, invisible networks of individual academics – had a 'primary role in self-identity,

communication, and the bonding of members of the profession' (Clark 1987b, 249). They provided 'intellectual sustenance' (Clark 1987b, 250) and, in their formal variations, help a discipline or specialism to 'develop, spread its influence, and enhance its sense of solidarity' (Clark 1987b, 234). In parallel with the cultural overlap Clark described earlier, professors' multiple memberships of these associations created further interconnection and cohesion. 'In a profession of professions, overlapping voluntary linkages are the nearest thing to social structure that provides order and integration' (Clark 1987b, 254).

### The logic of the profession

The final part of the book consisted of a single, concluding chapter, 'The logic of the profession'. In this, Clark argued that the academic profession had entered a third moment, echoing Christopher Jencks' and David Riesman's *The Academic Revolution* (Jencks and Riesman 1968). The first was characterised by weak amateurism since, before the Civil War, American academics were essentially hired hands. The second moment, from the 1870s onwards, when specialisation triumphed and academic departments took charge, the 'major disciplines became separate professions in themselves' (Clark 1987b, 259). Professionalism developed but the academy was still small enough to be enveloped in a strong pretence of community in what he fleetingly referred to as 'the golden age' (Clark 1987b, 259).

From 1960, the third moment of professionalisation had given rise to a quantum leap in the differentiation of sectors and subjects. The profession was now huge, complex, dispersed, uncontrollable and boundaryless. According to Clark, its 'bottom' layer – primarily in the community colleges – was becoming deprofessionalised. The massification of higher education had cost the profession dear and, he argued, in some sectors, 'the third moment is a major regression' (Clark 1987b, 261).

Clark also employed the prevailing hierarchy of prestige to explain the variations in the ways in which discipline and organisation interact in different institutional settings. At the uppermost levels of this hierarchy, American higher education had been shaped mainly by its professional groups. Where the orientation was towards research, disciplines were powerful and departments strong. At the lower levels, organisational imperatives held sway. Here, where the orientation was towards teaching, the importance of disciplines faded and the influence of departments weakened.

The interaction between profession and organization produces a fundamental divide among professors that appears in the many dimensions of professionalism...Opposing forces...tend to split the academic profession in two. (Clark 1987b, 264)

'In the inability to reward undergraduate teaching, we find the Achilles heel of the American research university' (Clark 1987b, 265), whereas:

... the community college has difficulty in being responsive to the faculty's need for engagement in scholarship... Then the Achilles heel is found in a winding-down of the scholarly model and a loss of academic respect. The central problems of one sector are virtually opposite the central problems of the other. (Clark 1987b, 266)

Clark concluded with three judgements on the logic of the American academic profession. Foremost was the hegemony of subjects: the pursuit of knowledge, with its inner logic and bottom-up dynamics. For Clark, however, this hegemony was loosened where teaching took over from research, opening the way to influence from external demands, primarily consumer satisfaction.

Second, academics' dual commitment to subjects and institutions had strengthened the centrifugal forces within this profession of professions, countering any unifying, standardising and

isomorphic tendencies normally found in unitary vocations. 'Polymorphism is the dominant trend; differentiation is more prized than commonality. The academic profession is qualitatively different in its extreme pluralism of contents and commitments' (Clark 1987b, 271).

Finally, the human activities of research and teaching, the devotion to knowledge and the intrinsic rewards of disciplinary diversions ensured that academic life remained, for some, a calling. Or, as Clark put it, (borrowing from Henry James' observation that true happiness means acquiring) an 'absorbing errand'. He wrote, 'It has moral content, contributing to civic virtue' (Clark 1987b, 274). Where this ran strong, the profession remained attractive.

### The book's reception

We are fortunate... to have Professor Clark's wonderfully insightful and reflective analysis. (Boyer 1987, xx)

... yet another magnificent contribution to the sociology of education... (Halsey 1989, 88)

Burton Clark has contributed to closing the knowledge gap with a notable landmark of publication in his study of the American academic profession. (Halsey 1992, 2)

Much has been written about faculty – and much of it was shaped by Clark's own work in the field. (Rhoades 2007, 139)

Clark's comprehensive investigation into academic life shows quite vividly how disciplinary specialization fosters fragmentation, such that disciplinary categories organize academic life but do so into small separate worlds. (Gumpert 2007, 41)

As the pioneering studies of Tony Becher in England and Burton Clark in the United States made plain, academic work is 'a many splendoured thing'. (Neave 2009, 21)

According to his successors, *The Academic Life* was a seminal work and continues to be a touchstone for the study of the American and other national academic professions. Clark's book and his edited collection of international comparative papers have been positively referred to in most of the major contributions on the topic since, by Philip Altbach, Tony Becher, Ernest Boyer, Jürgen Enders, A.H. Halsey and right up to Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein's *The American Faculty* in 2006 (Schuster and Finkelstein 2006). In 1989, Clark was granted the Outstanding Book Award of the American Educational Research Association for *The Academic Life*. However, as I shall argue, this enduring influence has been both a strength and a weakness of the subsequent scholarship in this field.

From a British perspective, it is pertinent to single out A.H. Halsey's 1989 review of *The Academic Life*, written just as Halsey was about to embark on the research for his third investigation of the academic profession in Britain, later published as *Decline of Donnish Dominion* (Halsey 1992). Halsey described Clark's book as 'of compelling interest to British readers' (Halsey 1989, 88) and went on to contrast the position of faculty in the two countries. For him – and others, such as Martin Trow (Trow 1988) – the professional status of academics on this side of the Atlantic had deteriorated to the point where the British higher education system was in crisis. In contrast to the academic calling of many American academics who 'glowed' with the devotion to knowledge, many British teachers 'glower with discontent' (Halsey 1989, 92). This 'crisis of finance, autonomy and morale' (Trow 1988, 85) for Halsey and Trow was the result of both structural dilemmas and government policy: in particular the hierarchical binary system that reflected the social class and status of the staff and students that inhabited it.

From one point of view the system is meritocratic. From another it is a reflection of the class and status hierarchy. Like other systems of higher education the British universities and colleges illustrate the subtle accommodation of ascription to achievement in the reproduction of classes through meritocratic educational selection. (Halsey 1989, 92)

Hostile government policy towards higher education, Halsey argued, should not be allowed to obscure more deep-rooted efforts 'to maintain the elite character and size of the existing arrangements' and the particular 'British conception of the nature of a university and its relation to the wider society in which it exists' (Halsey 1989, 93). By contrast, he noted, Clark had described an American post-secondary system that had 'an all-pervading sense of service to a wide range of organised interests' despite (or perhaps, partly, because of) its market orientation. It was the very different organisational and financial arrangements of the US system that gave rise to enhanced academic morale.

### **Clark's subsequent writing on the academic profession**

In 1997, Clark had one more go at writing about differentiation in the American academic profession in *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences (Clark 1997). For this paper, 'Small worlds, different worlds' became the title, and this was conjoined with the subtitle: 'The uniqueness and troubles of American academic professions', hinting at a slightly less optimistic perspective on the topic ten years after the publication of *The Academic Life*. He reiterated the primary matrix of disciplinary and institutional differentiation over and above the 'background characteristics of academics', such as class, race and gender. He identified five systemic concerns: of 'secondarization and remediation' (due to open access for poorly educated entrants), excessive teaching loads, attenuated professional control, fragmented academic culture and diminished intrinsic reward and motivation.

In the paper he presented three arguments:

- that across the dispersed professoriate more academics taught too much rather than too little;
- that more of them were increasingly marginalised in part-time positions, thus, addressing in part, a deficiency in the earlier work; and
- that increasing political and bureaucratic controls denigrated the intrinsic rewards of this kind of work.

Clark concluded that the academic professions could not be improved by state control or market forces. He presented four ideas for future reform:

- the intellectual core of faculty work should be protected and strengthened;
- academic and managerial personnel must be more integrated, thus aligning academics with institutional interests;
- links between divergent academic cultures needed to be better understood and promoted;
- the intrinsic rewards of academic life ought to be highlighted and respected.

Finally, he concluded his paper with a call for more attention to 'the conditions of professional inspiration and self-regulation' (Clark 1997, 40).

### **What might we say about the book now?**

So, even by the mid-1990s, Clark was arguing that, if you knew the institution and discipline of an academic you could tell much about the academic life of that individual. Shortly after Clark's death, I asked Martin Finkelstein, one of the leading authorities on the US academic profession, the same question about today's American academic. In 2010, Finkelstein felt, you would *also* need to know:



- Whether they were part-time, fixed-term contract, tenure track or tenured. I suggested that, even if tenured, it would also be important to ascertain whether they were subject to regular and stringent review.
- Their age and time in the profession.
- Their gender; and, again I added, their ethnicity – or, in particular in North America, whether they were ‘faculty of color’.
- And, probably, how they entered the profession – particularly if they had a conventional academic career or transferred from another profession, such as accountancy, architecture or nursing: ‘accidental academics’ in Finkelstein’s apt term.

So, albeit with the benefit of hindsight, we might agree with Clark that, by the mid-1980s, the American academic profession was differentiating. However, there was (is?) still some way for this process to go, and the fault lines would multiply and the hierarchies would deepen and become more entrenched. The explanatory matrix itself would need to become more sophisticated and complex.

This then reflects on the degree and nature of the cultural integration that Clark detected in the 1987 volume. His was a Durkheimian search for the source of social order within expansion and increasing fragmentation (Clark 1987b, 279). In *The Academic Life*, Clark had evoked the spirit of US federalism to explain how a huge and highly differentiated system adheres, culturally: *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one. Rereading his book, I wasn’t entirely convinced by this explanation, or indeed the assertion of some kind of enduring internal coherence derived from the academic calling, even in the mid-1980s. By the mid-1990s, Clark seemed to have acknowledged problems with this assertion of faculty integration (Clark 1997). Again, with the hindsight of more than two decades, this seems even less supported by the evidence of trends, for example, in the marketisation of academic disciplines, the growth in numbers of women academics (but concentrated in lower status subjects and positions), and in the fractures implied by Finkelstein’s comments.

In his introduction to the collected essays whose genesis preceded *The Academic Life*, Clark had noted a chronological dimension to the tensions between the integration and differentiation of the profession. Citing the chapter in that collection by Kenneth Ruscio on institutional sectors in the US (Ruscio 1987), Clark had written of a common socialization of graduates into the norms of science, scholarship and the university in the doctoral-granting sector that united new recruits to the profession, and the on-the-job imperatives that subsequently divided them as they entered the multiple sectors of the US system (Clark 1987, 8). This, perhaps, was one entry point to exploring the ways in which these tensions had been experienced by individual academics in their working lives and careers.

If there has been a more general movement towards integration, perhaps it has been in the blurring of distinctions between institutional types, as the ‘research university’ model has been pursued by the collegiate sector in the competitive hierarchy that is US higher education. However, this has happened largely since Clark’s book was published.

These trends remind us that broader transformations in the economy and society have contributed to the restructuring of higher education and academic work and careers, as much as academics themselves. The globalisation of labour markets, the ‘casualisation’ of employment conditions, the feminisation of the workforce, the mass production and circulation of knowledge – or, at least, ‘information’ – and the reconfiguration of professional work. These, and other, transformations are not unique to higher education, and their origins are to be found well before the mid-1980s. However, they did not really feature in Clark’s book, which was largely an internal study of academics’ perspectives. Of course, this internalist outlook is not entirely unrelated to his methodology and almost ethnography-orientated approach.

*The Academic Life* took, in effect, a case study approach to the American system of higher education as a whole, distinguishing it from the Western European systems included in the accompanying international volume, but grounded in exploratory interviews and extended to a book-length study. In this sense, the study paralleled – and matched in scope – the contemporary Carnegie Faculty Survey and previous studies of the American ‘professoriate’. While the quotations from the interviewees were rich and the analyses subtle, Clark did not view each of the 16 selected institutions, six disciplines or 170 interviewees as potential case studies in themselves, in which in-depth, contextualised analyses might have revealed subtle differences within a single category of institution, type of field or academic rank, for example. We might contrast this approach with Clark’s later work on entrepreneurial universities, in which he investigated individual institutions in their historical, geographical and relational settings in order to explain the dynamics of change.

The book employed the language of hierarchy: hierarchies of institutions, hierarchies of disciplines, hierarchies of academic ranks, hierarchies of tasks. Clearly, this informed Clark’s analysis to significant explanatory effect. Given the sweep and scope of the phenomena he was investigating, it was helpful, for example, to contrast the importance of disciplines and academic departments in the ‘elite’ research universities with that of institutional management in the mass community colleges. However, without the detail of institutional case studies to reveal the dynamics of change, the reader is left with the impression that these hierarchies are inevitable and immutable. The picture painted of the community college sector, for example, was uniformly bleak: workloads were heavy, teaching was largely remedial, faculty were poorly trained and effectively deprofessionalised – or worse, unionised – and the institutions managed by autocratic administrators. However, Clark did not reflect on college faculty’s commitment to enhancing the life chances for first generation students, widening access to knowledge, promoting learning related to employment and productivity, engaging with local communities. Paradoxically, given Clark’s comments about some quantitative research methodologies, the power of the metaphor of hierarchy in a system-wide analysis risked stereotyping the very organisational locations of faculty he sought to understand more fully.

Indeed, Clark appeared to confirm this in his conclusion to the accompanying edited volume:

The profession is inescapably layered, turned into a hierarchy of subprofessions organized by institutional sectors that vary in status. The odds on achieving a parity of esteem between noted professors in leading universities and part-time teachers in two-year programs seem no higher than the odds on developing a classless society. Differentiation overwhelms; and prestige is a valuable commodity in the higher education system and its mainline profession. (Clark 1987c, 380)

Clark did acknowledge that some ‘delaying’ could take place, but only unplanned, through academic drift. ‘Lower’ institutions attempted to imitate ‘higher’ ones, as academics and administrators sought higher status work and rewards. ‘But all such forces, planned and unplanned, swim upstream against the strong flow of differentiation’ (Clark 1987c, 380).

## Conclusion

Clark’s rich and insightful exploration of the internal life of academia in the US has proved highly influential in the subsequent study of the profession, and not only in North America and Western Europe. Possibly, too influential, although through no fault of the author. Consequently, subsequent scholarship has left gaps in this field of study. According to Gary Rhoades, these include the changing power relations between academic managers and professors – or ‘managed professionals’ as he terms them – and the impacts of feminism, marketisation and globalisation (Rhoades 2007). One might add the need to place the study of academic work and careers within the broader sociology of professions, especially those based on knowledge

production and circulation; and the necessity of linking higher education with larger social and economic developments.

Despite these criticisms – several of which reap the benefit of hindsight and dilute Clark's contribution with the limitations of subsequent scholarship – *The Academic Life* represented an impressive investigation of the largest and most complex national academic community in the world, which seriously attempted a detailed representation of the variations in its form.

### Notes on contributor

At the time of writing, William Locke was Assistant Director and Principal Policy Analyst in the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) at The Open University. He is directing the UK part of the international study of the *Changing Academic Profession* which is investigating the nature and extent of the changes experienced by the academic profession in recent years in more than 20 countries.

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