



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Senior Scholar as Historian, Gatekeeper, Elder

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

May 01, 2024

Tags: mentoring | wisdom | memory | senior scholar | elder | institution

(An audio version of this blog may be accessed [here](#).)

The rank of *senior scholar* is the highest and most revered. The hierarchy of the academy creates senior scholars by assigning newly minted faculty with the status of *junior scholar*, then over several years through a process of review, tenure and/or promotion, some colleagues reach the status of senior scholar. Promotion to senior scholar, as either Associate Professor, or Full Professor, is perceived as a badge of worthiness and nobility. The academy requires professorial participants to either ascend or be jettisoned. In some schools, earning the status of senior professor means having fought, brawled, struggled, and won.

Senior scholar status is entitled to previously unavailable resources, and opportunities—goodies not afforded the junior scholars. Senior scholars are expected to have responsibilities and obligations which are not the onus of junior scholars. However, at some schools, there is not a clear demarcation between the obligations of junior or senior scholars—juniors are given duties and responsibilities similar to, or aligned with, those given to senior scholars. All this is to say, there is a great deal of variation between schools when one considers the culture, hospitality, duties, and obligations attributed to junior/senior scholar status. I am not suggesting that one model is superior to the others. I am suggesting that one needs to read the context and know which model is functioning in the school where they are employed.

Who teaches senior professors how to be good senior professors? How do senior professors get mentored into their duties, power, influence, obligation? Who shows senior scholars how to transition from the institutional patterns, habits, and behaviors of junior status? How does the institution assist senior scholars in becoming their most generative selves in this season of seniority? By what process are senior scholars given permission to wield their power for the best impact upon students, community, and the institution's future? What if most senior scholars operate as novices in the community structure? What if, without senior scholars who are mindful and present, the community cannot become healthy nor flourish to its potential?

As I think of my own vocational journey, I have not been privy to conversations about identity as a senior scholar. Without benefit of critical reflection for planning, and without imaginative reflection for doing, it has not been easy to know what to do, or how to be, or what to be about, as a Full Professor. I have never been part of a conversation which helped me parse, decide, live-into, or imagine how the authority of the rank of senior scholar could be used, might be used, or should be used. When I was promoted to the rank of Full Professor, I was glad for the pay increase. Equally true was my lack of interest in the institutional loyalty that was so often inferred by some administrators.

I have learned to be a senior scholar by watching and engaging, that is, by trial and error. I have learned from the modeling of others only because I paid attention to those in this rank and wondered about their lives and professional decisions. In so doing, I have noticed three personas of senior faculty, or three modes of professionalism for the highest faculty rank: *Gatekeeper*, *Historian*, *Elder*. I am sure there are other modes. For now, I want to describe these three.

### **Senior Scholar as Gatekeeper**

The gatekeeper recognizes the power and influence of the highest rank and intentionally wields that power in decision making opportunities which form and shape the institution and its future. In acknowledgement of the gatekeeper's authority, colleagues assign the gatekeeper as chair of the most central and significant committees. The gatekeeper is consulted on major institutional decisions by the highest administrators including the trustees. If this persona is considerate, gracious, humble, community minded, and collaborative, the colleague is contributing to an ethos of cooperation, deep listening, and shared care. The danger of this persona is when the person operates through power-mongering, tyrannical, opportunistic, mean-spirited, and bigoted decisions. Schools can be treacherous when these people attend to maintaining the oppressive status quo which results in deepening the toxicity of the school's ecology.

### **Senior Scholar as Historian**

This persona works as being the reminder, the memory keeper, or the historian. Having served on the faculty for a long period of time, the person has a long memory from years of experience and participation. When the new people, new programs, new projects, or curriculum changes are considered, the person playing the role of historian will recount the moments when, in the

past, a similar attempt was considered or made. The voice of the historian is often used to hold the institution accountable to the mission, legacy, and tradition. The historian often holds dear those colleagues who are no longer employed by the institution or no longer members of the faculty by invoking their names at meetings or telling stories about “the good old days.” This persona can be quite helpful as an institution plans for the future and is able, with memories of the past, to press forward and adapt. The person can also hold the institution hostage to the past and to earlier decisions which are not adequate for unfamiliar futures.

### **Senior Scholar as Elder**

This person may or may not be elderly, per se. This person recognizes that they are no longer in the fray of accomplishing status and rank, and makes use of this phase of professional life to regularly provide insight, wisdom, and assistance to others. This person uses their power and influence to build community, mentor others, and be personally creative. They create time to regularly sit with individuals and groups for wise counsel. The communal role of the elder is reinforced by the way members of the community respect them and treat them with kindness, deference, and regard. They are admired and respected.

Elder scholars will often take on the mantle of making “good trouble” so that the more vulnerable colleagues are not blamed or receive retaliation in difficult institutional battles. They can afford to risk, stick-their-necks-out, knowing their status means that they will receive little reprisal.

I suspect I most admire the mode of elder because I come from a tradition that promotes, and depends upon, those at the highest ranks to reach back, reach down, reach out, and help. The Black church tradition has its gatekeepers and its historians. But we *revere* our elders. In my tradition, we defer to Big Mama, Mother of the Church, the Saints, the Teachers, and the Prayer Warriors.

I am working on my elder persona.

The toxic environment which plagues so many faculties is not lodged in the brick, mortar, and drywall of buildings. The toxicity permeates the relationships of the community. The lack of care, unfriendliness, bigotry, and acts of dehumanization reside in the ways people treat one another. Toxic environments—relational patterns of ugliness, shaming, blaming, ruthlessness, and deadly competition—might be inherited, but they are upheld and maintained by our choices of continued violent behaviors, lack of relational skills, and low emotional intelligence. Senior scholars, as gatekeepers, historians, and elders have the power and authority to shift and repair toxic environments in schools—if we would.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2024/05/senior-scholar-as-historian-gatekeeper-elder/>

