Professional Community in Comprehensive High Schools: The Two Worlds of Academic and Vocational Teachers

An occupational community comprises “a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; whose identity is drawn from the work; who share with one another a set of values, norms, and perspectives that apply to but extend beyond work-related matters; and whose work relationships meld work and leisure” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984, p. 287). At one level, teachers might be said to form an occupational community distinct from other occupations. But within teaching, there are also distinct communities of teachers. Beyond the formal distinctions made by categorical labels are the connotative dimensions that “lead some members to separate themselves from others who do denotatively similar work” (p. 295).

This chapter concentrates on aspects of professional identity and community in five sites, all comprehensive public high schools in a single state. Insights into teachers’ worlds are derived from a comparison between

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teachers of the core academic subjects (English, social studies, science, mathematics, and foreign language) and those in three traditional vocational subjects (industrial arts, business, and home economics). To what extent are these high school teachers members of the same professional community? In what ways do their respective orientations to the work of teaching unite or divide them? Foster closer integration of their work or inhibit it?

Academic and vocational teachers share certain realities that demarcate the occupation of teaching from other work. Both rely on the ebb and flow of life in a classroom to yield "craft pride," a sense of accomplishment. Both spend their workdays surrounded by throngs of adolescents and speak in parallel ways about their concerns for students' accomplishments and aspirations. Among both groups, there are those who bring to teaching a passion for their subject and an enthusiasm for the students they teach, and there are those for whom teaching is no more than a job. In these and other ways, the teacher of American literature and the teacher of occupational auto dwell in the same world. But there are also important differences.

Academic and vocational teachers occupy two separate worlds in comprehensive high schools. Not all teachers and not in all schools, to be sure, but the "two worlds" phenomenon is sufficiently pervasive and sufficiently embedded in habitual ways of thought and deed to command attention. It is also a phenomenon that has remained nearly invisible in the mainstream research on secondary schools. That is, the discoveries of the past decade regarding school context, teachers' professional development, and teachers' career commitment are derived nearly exclusively from teachers in the core academic curriculum or are presented in ways that obscure within-school differences.

**SUBJECT STATUS AND PROFESSIONAL RESPECT**

Persistent stereotypes paint high school teachers as resolutely subject centered. Until very recently, there have been few efforts to penetrate that stereotype to discover the meaning that teachers attach to subject specialization. The studies that do exist are devoted almost exclusively to the nature of subject affiliation among teachers of traditional academic subjects. Among the examples are Elbaz's (1983) study of the English teacher "Sarah," Ball and Lacey's (1984) portrait of subject subcultures in four English departments, and Siskin's (1991) exploration of the academic department in comprehensive and magnet high schools. Together, these closely situated accounts of subject specialization help us to penetrate the
stereotype. To these examples we now contribute a view of subject affiliation expressed by teachers of conventionally defined vocational curricula.

THE STATUS OF SUBJECT SPECIALTIES

The social organization of high school subjects mirrors the subject matter organization of higher education. Fields that are organized as recognized disciplines, holding departmental status in the academy, tend to command greater institutional respect and compete more successfully for institutional resources in the high school. This is not to deny that there are local variations responsive to local community character and priorities or to argue that the imprimatur of subject expertise is impervious to the relationships and reputations established by particular teachers in particular circumstances. On the whole, however, subject hierarchies favor those in the academic tradition (Ball & Lacey, 1984; Goodson, 1988).

Vocational studies in the U.S. high school have typically been treated as nonsubjects. (This phenomenon is not uniquely American; see Burgess, 1983, 1984; Connell, 1985.) Vocational teachers respond to subject hierarchies in part by campaigning for academic legitimacy. In Connell’s (1985) words:

Marginalised curricula can gain space, status, and resources in the school by redefining themselves as part of the hegemonic curriculum.

... The pressure on a marginalised subject to do this can be quite serious (pp. 98; see also Little & Threatt, 1992).

Some vocational teachers argue that their preparation has been intellectually demanding and academically rigorous: “Home economists have a lot of scientific background.” At the same time, they contest the singular standard of the university as that against which subject worth is properly assessed. When they identify alternative grounds on which status ought to be acknowledged, they point to the economy—the world of work and commerce—rather than the world of schooling. These comments from a home economics teacher typify the arguments we heard from many teachers:

All of the nutritionists and dietitians come out of [home economics]. The fashion industry comes out of our field. ... Interior design is our field. ... People have always thought of us as “stitch and stir,” but when you think of the world of work, we probably represent one of the largest segments of society’s jobs.

Such alternative claims for status on the basis of real-world considerations have gained little hold in these comprehensive high schools. The
power of subject differences to enhance or undermine teachers’ professional identity is reflected in the differing degrees of confidence with which an English teacher and a home economics teacher parade their occupations in the world beyond the school. The English teacher celebrates her affiliation with English and with this English department in particular when she boasts, “You know, I’ve had people come up and say the Oak Valley English department is the best place in the county. . . . And I think English . . . is a subject that allows us an opportunity to really get to know kids. . . .”

A home economics teacher, by contrast, feels moved to hide her subject identity:

When I go places and people ask, “What do you do?” I always say I teach high school students, I teach teenagers. I always know the next question is, “What do you teach?” You know, I really don’t want to tell them anymore. “Oh, home ec! Oh, is that still around? Oh! I didn’t know they still had that!”

Subject status arises not only from the perceived rigor of one’s undergraduate education and professional preparation, but also from the perceived intellectual demand of course content in the secondary curriculum. According to vocational teachers, others consistently denigrate the cognitive or intellectual worth of curricula officially designated as vocational. A drafting teacher comments, “It’s taken about 15 years for some people to actually give us any credibility that there’s any intelligence in manipulative skills. Most of the time, the only intelligence [they] will accept is the reading-memory skills, which are the academic skills.” Implicit here are the assumptions that work in the vocational areas requires fewer intellectual resources than work in academic subjects and that both the adults and the young people who dwell in the workshops are lower in native abilities than are those who populate academic classrooms.

Along with perceptions of intellectual substance comes a parallel set of perceptions regarding teacher work load: the intellectual, interactive, and pragmatic demands of teaching in one subject rather than in another. Among the academic domains, teachers make fine (if not always well-informed) distinctions regarding one another’s teaching demands—observing, for example, that the load is easier in math, where the curriculum is highly standardized and evaluation of student work is straightforward.

Vocational teachers are generally convinced that their academic colleagues believe vocational courses to be easy on teachers as well as on students. As one home economics teacher reports, “I think a lot of them, probably many of them, feel that what we do is make cookies.” Most put
forth counterarguments, cataloguing the hours of outside preparation required to organize classroom projects and demonstrations and to assemble and maintain the necessary equipment and materials. These hours, they claim, equal or exceed the hours required to grade papers and examinations in the academic classes. Here, a home economics teacher describes the burden of preparing for food classes compared with what she thinks is required to prepare for a math class or any class that is teachable from a textbook:

With home ec . . . there’s so much preparation, there’s so much. It’s not like you’re just opening a book and “Okay, guys, we’re going to do Chapter 13 today. Let’s read and discuss.” That type of thing . . . I mean, that seems kind of cut and dried, where here there’s so much activity and so much [material] and you have to consider your budget . . .

And a business teacher said:

I have had comments from at least one English person that I happen to have a prep period with that [showed] she had no idea that we worked as hard as we did in the business department. She thought that all we did was go in and say, “Okay, do this.” And the kids did it, and you took no papers home to grade and et cetera, et cetera.

Ironically, these comments also underscore the way in which status differences are perpetuated by the relative privacy of teachers’ work. Neither the academic teacher nor the vocational teacher whose exchanges we glimpse here has a complete and realistic grasp of one another’s classroom practice or work load burdens.

Yet the specific relations among categorical subject status, the locally meaningful status of particular subjects in particular schools, and the realities of teachers’ work remain to be worked out. For example, the advantage that generally accrues to academic teachers in these schools is diminished at Valley High School, where rapid changes in the student population have frustrated many academic teachers; the same changes have consolidated the position of the vocational programs. And at Oak Valley, the esteem that teachers derive from their association with a strong school may only intensify the status problems that accompany membership in a vocational department. A business teacher who says, “I think it’s a great school,” also declares, “Had I to do it over again, I probably would not have become a vocational ed teacher. I would have been in one of the
academic subjects. . . . The counselors and everybody else, it’s like they just say, ‘Well, that’s an elective and it’s not that important.’”

In sum, the status differences between vocational and academic teachers originate partly in the status hierarchy of the subject disciplines in higher education and in the perceived intellectual demands posed by academic and nonacademic fields of study in the secondary curriculum. They are sustained, too, by the value attached to the student clienteles with whom academic and nonacademic teachers work.

**Subject Status and Student Clientele**

Throughout the service professions, the status of practitioners is closely linked to the status of the clients they serve. On the whole, professionals who work with children rank lower in the status hierarchy than those whose clients are adults. Work with older children confers greater prestige than work with younger ones; hence, many of these teachers tell of careers improved by a move from junior high school to high school or by the opportunity to work part-time in a community college.

Within high school teaching, still finer distinctions are made. The status order of subjects, aligned as it is with the subject hierarchy of the university, is responsive to the college-bound or non-college-bound status of one’s students. One wins accolades by association with students who achieve success in the academic curriculum or in highly visible extracurricular activities that are also valued components of university life (athletics, band, or other performing arts). Conversely, an academic teacher’s standing is eroded by exclusive affiliation with low-achieving students. Talbert (1990) estimates that about one quarter of U.S. high school teachers could be considered “tracked” by assignments to teach low-achieving students. (A still smaller percentage of teachers work exclusively with high-achieving students, teaching a steady diet of advanced placement or honors classes.) Talbert’s analysis of the 1984 High School and Beyond data, together with Finley’s (1984) ethnographic study of teacher tracking in a large high school English department, suggests that consistent assignment to low-track classes has a deleterious effect on teachers’ orientation toward their work. According to both studies, low-track teachers less often perceive themselves as well supported by administrators and colleagues, are less likely to enjoy opportunities for professional growth, are less successful in the competition for instructional and organizational resources, and feel less efficacious in their work with students. The consequence, argues Talbert, is to exacerbate the inequalities experienced by students.

The teacher tracking phenomenon affects a relatively small segment of
academic teachers in these schools. It is a circumstance in which some academic teachers find themselves, and one that varies widely within schools by department. Teachers most vulnerable to low-track assignments are those newest to the school and those held in lowest regard by administrators or department heads. Although there is, no doubt, a performance threshold below which a department cannot fall and still retain its legitimacy as an academic enterprise, academic departments retain their privileged position even when some individual teachers find themselves confined to remedial classes. And the affected teachers continue to identify more firmly with their departments than with similarly situated low-track teachers in other departments (Talbert, 1991).

However, the low-track designation well describes the majority of vocational teachers and, indeed, entire vocational departments or programs. In all five schools, student placement patterns concentrate the “low” and the “special” in nonacademic classes. In some very real sense, these are vocational teachers without vocational students. That is, they receive few students who are clearly dedicated to a vocational course of study (Little & Threatt, 1992). Presumably, students enthusiastic about pursuing a program of work education would soften or eliminate the stigma of external status attributions. A drafting teacher compares his former life in a specialized vocational center with his present work in a comprehensive high school, recalling, “My most enjoyable teaching assignment was over at the vocational center . . . . because the students had a direction. . . . I was teaching kids to become drafters and designers and engineers. . . .”

Teachers who cultivated a craft because it held genuine appeal for them and who entered teaching in the hope of finding students with similar inclinations now find themselves viewed not as skilled craftspeople but as caretakers of marginal students. Neither their own subject expertise nor their accomplishments with academically marginal students yields much recognition. To vocational teachers, the link between the prestige accorded teachers and the academic standing of their students often represents a poor alignment of effort and reward. Some teachers respond with equanimity. Others respond with resentment:

So, you begin to feel real unaffirmed. . . . So, who gets the awards? It’s the ones that are glitzy or the ones that have all the top-notch students who can stand up and say, “Because of this teacher, I got into Stanford or I got into Yale.” Well, what about people down here who every day are putting up with all of the riffraff, who are putting up with the discipline problems, who are really working in the trenches? And I guess that’s maybe where we see ourselves. We’re in the trenches.
Both kinds of responses, however, confirm the link between a
teacher's identity and status and those of the clientele, reinforced and
perpetuated by a schooling organized to distinguish between college-bound
and non-college-bound students and to bracket preparation for work from
academic endeavors. Such distinctions also constrain the ways in which
teachers might contribute to one another's work by engaging in cross-disci-
plinary ventures, teaching one another's students, or acknowledging one
another's achievements.

Teachers' subject commitments and subject philosophies are thus sepa-
rated only with difficulty from concerns for students. Teachers are united
or divided by the priorities they express and the views they hold regarding
"what's best for kids" (see, for example, the description of competing
teacher subcultures in Ball, 1987; Hargreaves, 1986; Metz, 1978). In this
respect, academic and vocational teachers share a concern for students'
command of basic academic skills, their overall level of academic achieve-
ment, their personal maturation, and their social development. Nonetheless,
it is the differences rather than the similarities in their orientation to
teaching that most seem to mark the relations between vocational and aca-
demic teachers. Academic teachers more often sound the recurrent theme
of subject mastery and college preparation and derive their sense of indi-
vidual and institutional pride (or frustration) from the number of college
acceptances. Vocational teachers are more often set apart by their concerns
for preparing students for employment. Their views do not always receive
the enthusiastic approbation of administrators. The principal of one school
confides, "I have to tell you that even personally I am not convinced that
our job should be training kids for jobs in high school. I think we're doing
a disservice to kids by having them shut down their options too
soon. . . . [Preparing for jobs is] an aspect of what we're about, but I don't
believe it's our primary purpose." The collegial environment in
which vocational teachers work is shaped in part by the school priorities
voiced by administrators and in part by the general disposition toward col-
lege preparation that teachers in the school express.

THE SATISFACTIONS OF SUBJECT SPECIALISM

Teachers' continued enthusiasm for teaching is bound up with opportuni-
ties to find both intellectual stimulation and emotional satisfaction in the
classroom. Teachers judge their careers in part by the success they experi-
ence in getting to teach the subjects that they know and like, in the schools
they want, with students they consider both able and interested, among
colleagues they admire. On semester-by-semester and year-by-year bases,
their pleasure in teaching is calibrated by the combination of classes con-
figured in a six-period teaching day.
Teachers typically place subject commitments amid broader conceptions of what it means to be a teacher. That is, they place loyalty to the subject alongside loyalties expressed in “working with kids.” Many, for example, cite involvement with one or more student activities. They view with ambivalence colleagues who know their subject but who “can’t connect with kids” or “don’t really like kids.” Many construct their teaching task in terms of supporting the general maturation of young people: “helping them become independent.” Such teachers paint the subject as a medium, not an end in itself. Certainly, subject enthusiasms alone cannot compensate for troubles with students or always help to resolve them. Nor do subject enthusiasms and subject commitments ensure teaching that is substantively lively or pedagogically inventive. Nor, finally, do all teachers evince genuine interest in the subjects that they teach, or invest equally in extending their subject expertise.

Nonetheless, enthusiasm for the subject is one major contributor to teachers’ engagement in teaching. The passion for subject that many of these high school teachers bring to their work is exemplified in their stories of deciding to teach. Math teacher Charles Ashton considers geometry his favorite course and recalls his first introduction to it as a student:

Geometry was the thing that really turned me on to mathematics. For me, it was a critical course, and I guess I now interpret it the same. . . . It was so logical and so obvious, I thought God had given me the answer to the universe. It’s kind of like listening to a Beethoven symphony in a way; this is the way it’s supposed to be.

Hannah Naftigel started out as an elementary education major and switched to home economics after a course she found inspiring. “Something clicked in me when I took that course,” she recalls. “It felt like I had come home.” Both of these teachers came to teaching with a commitment to the subject, and both retain a certain subject loyalty. For them and for others like them, the most attractive reform proposals are those that would intensify the pride and pleasure to be found in subject expertise.

To some extent, both Mr. Ashton and Ms. Naftigel must struggle to experience the rewards of subject specialism in their comprehensive high schools. Both are affected by the ethnic, linguistic, and academic diversity of the students they teach, leaving them uncertain how to use the medium of the subject to reach all students. Both are affected by the tedium that may result from many years in the same assignment and the urge to find intellectual stimulation. As one of Mr. Ashton’s math colleagues sums it up, “You know, the 300th time you’ve explained angle-side-angle [theorem in geometry], it’s really boring.” And both are sensitive to the ways in which particular teaching assignment configurations—the combination of
good or tough classes in a five- or six-period day—can enlarge or diminish the satisfaction they find in their subject matter.

However, despite the similarities in the subject commitments that Mr. Ashton and Ms. Naftigal bring to their teaching and despite some commonalities in the teaching environment they encounter, these two teachers differ in the opportunities that each finds to derive craft pride from subject matter teaching. Recent reforms combine with the traditional subject hierarchy to place the satisfactions of the mathematics teacher more readily at hand and to render those of the home economics teacher more uncertain. Such externalities—the increase in academic graduation requirements and the corresponding restriction on electives, for example—account for part of the story. Another part is bound up with dynamics internal to the school, especially those that govern teaching assignment.

**Academic teachers: subject specialism and the politics of seniority.** Nearly all of the academic teachers in these five schools teach full-time in their area of specialization; they can legitimately and comfortably lay claim to being an English teacher or a math teacher. This is not to say that they look upon their course configuration with equal satisfaction and confidence or that they attain the same measure of success in each class (Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1990). However, whatever the combination of subject and student they seek, academic teachers are generally able to forge it in the context of their primary subject specialty.

For academic teachers, seniority in the subject department is a major factor in determining whether the specific assignment that one receives is a good fit with one’s preparation and preferences. To varying degrees, teachers compete over what Finley (1984) termed “the good schedule,” one that represents, from the teacher’s perspective, a desirable fit with favored subjects and students. Status considerations figure prominently in Finley’s analysis; teachers earn prestige when they teach subjects and students highly valued by the larger institution and the community, and their prestige is eroded by teaching low-achieving students and remedial content.

The dynamics of the seniority system have perhaps best been uncovered by Neufeld (1984), who finds teachers able to describe its features and consequences in considerable detail: how long it takes to get seniority, the maneuvering within a personalized hierarchy, the appeals to fairness that help weaken the power of seniority, the frustrations of waiting out your turn, and the disposition to lock in a good course once in possession of it.

The English department and science department at Oak Valley High School represent contrast cases in the use of seniority to decide teacher assignments. In the English department, the effects of seniority, although
not completely absent, are greatly muted by the presence of a department policy that calls for the regular rotation of remedial courses and for widely distributed responsibility for the department’s course offerings. In addition, the chair makes a well-publicized effort to grant each teacher his or her first-choice class. The rotational principle is visible in the master schedule; only one of the department’s 25 regular teachers shows a heavy load of remedial classes 2 years in a row. (This contrasts with Finley’s [1984] English department of equal size, in which nine teachers were consistently assigned to low-track classes.) Of the department’s 24 teachers, 5 dominate the honors and advanced placement classes (accounting for all such sections in 1989–1990 and 10 of 13 sections in 1990–1991). In no case do honors classes make up a teacher’s entire teaching load.

In the science department, a different picture emerges. The chair of this department, too, maintains that the department bears a responsibility toward low-achieving students. However, there is no equivalent norm for rotating the assignment of remedial classes among teachers. In a 3-year period, the chair once acquiesced to pressure from the administration to take a turn at teaching a basic science course, but the experiment was short-lived (one section taught one time). He and other experienced teachers consistently dominated the advanced courses and courses enrolling juniors and seniors. The department’s newest members teach full loads of the lowest-level basic science, life science, and physical science classes.

Academic teachers, then, are very likely to be teaching within their subject specialization but are less certain to be matched consistently with courses and students with whom they feel most efficacious. Career trajectories and fluctuations are linked to what teachers individually and collectively come to view as “the good schedule.” The good schedule, in turn, is shaped by the demands, opportunities, and rewards presented by both the subject and the students.

**Vocational teachers: subject specialization and the politics of electives.** The opportunities for vocational teachers to demonstrate their subject expertise and to indulge their subject-related enthusiasms are less powerfully shaped by the dynamics of seniority than by factors associated with course-taking patterns and student placement policies: the decline of enrollment in nonacademic electives following shifts in high school graduation requirements, and student placement practices that populate vocational classes with students whom teachers see less as work oriented than as academically marginal.

The pattern across the five schools shows a steady record of decline in total numbers and in full-time assignment of vocational specialists. Most resilient have been the home economics (or consumer/family studies) and
business departments; most diminished have been the trades-oriented industrial arts departments. Increasingly, teachers preserve full-time teaching assignments by teaching outside their primary subject area or by converting traditional courses to serve the purposes of basic skills instruction in academic areas. Departments maintain teaching positions by developing a marketable combination of vocational courses and courses that might be termed personal interest electives. Common among the vocational teachers is a pattern of survival-oriented entrepreneurialism—scouring and hustling—by which individual teachers retain sufficient resources to carve out a full-time schedule of courses.

The decline in teaching staff is matched by a decline in the number of course offerings and by a shift in the types of courses available. At the beginning of our study, all five of the schools offered fewer vocational courses than their staffing permitted. That is, teachers whose background and experience lay in industrial arts, business, agriculture, or home economics were teaching fewer than five periods a day in those areas. Over the 3-year period, all schools reduced the total number of offerings still further. Thus, the range of course offerings that would communicate a subject specialty and provide like-minded colleagues for teachers is missing. Increasingly, teachers confront a compressed curriculum that bears little resemblance to the coherent program in which many once participated and from which they draw their professional identity. Wood shop teacher Ed Gordon describes a series of program cuts that have left him “teaching art this year for the first time.” Mr. Gordon calculates that he has 12 years before retirement. He says, “I still love wood and I believe in it. But I’ll hang on.”

Mr. Gordon is resigned to hanging on, but one cannot help but gain the impression of curricula steadily weakened and careers derailed. Not all vocational teachers respond with the same equanimity. Such career fluctuations take their toll on teachers’ commitment and performance. Greg Zeller, some years younger than Mr. Gordon, resists the prospect of “going backward” in his career. When his small engines program was cut, he entered aggressively into a district-level project to develop an applied technology course sequence. He tells us that if his plans are thwarted, he will leave teaching altogether. Short of that, he implies, he will curtail the energy he devotes to his teaching. And he will be more skeptical about new proposals in the future.

Subject identities and the teaching priorities to which they are tied remain a fundamental part of professional community for most of these teachers. The subject designations of departments count in the competition for resources, and subject expertise counts in the view that teachers have of one another. The opportunities for colleagueship among teachers and for
the reconstruction of purposes and programs within schools reside largely in the resources of subject expertise. And teachers’ subject affiliations are given prominence by the departmental organization of the high school.

DEPARTMENTS

Departments linked to established subject matter disciplines are a significant organizational feature in these comprehensive high schools and are the primary frame of reference for most teachers. Despite assaults on segmented curricula and departmental organization (Hargreaves, 1988; Sizer, 1984, 1992), subject matter departments continue to dominate the social and political organization of secondary schools. These comprehensive high schools are no exception. At four schools, subject matter affiliations are rendered organizationally salient through a formal departmental structure; at a fifth school, efforts to build and sustain an alternative structure organized around learning units are gradually giving way to restored subject matter boundaries (Siskin, 1991). Among the five schools, no fewer than 86 percent and as many as 97 percent of regular classroom teachers were teaching full-time in a single-subject department. In recent experiments to realign vocational and academic curricula, schools preserve subject matter groupings even while organizing new multidisciplinary “houses” or “career clusters.” To some extent, schools are driven by external circumstances to do so. The state’s curriculum frameworks are subject specific, as are testing protocols, state-approved textbooks, university admission requirements, and regulations governing teacher licensure and assignment.

Given the dominant subject-matter organization of high schools, departments represent a naturally occurring ground for teachers’ interactions and satisfactions (or frustrations). The department is the most prominent domain of potential interdependence among teachers. In seeking meaningful arenas for interaction and interdependence among teachers who work largely as “independent artisans,” Huberman argues in Chapter 1, “I would look instead to the department [not the school] . . . as the unit of collaborative planning and execution in a secondary school. This is where people have concrete things to tell one another and concrete instructional help to provide one another; this is where the contexts of instruction actually overlap.”

The relationship between academic and vocational teachers is thus inescapably linked to the history of subject organization in high schools. Our survey data include reported levels of departmental identification across the five schools. On survey measures, all schools report moderate to
high levels of departmental affiliation. In interviews, too, teachers make the department or subject a prominent part of the stories they tell. They do so even at Rancho, where the faculty has made a concerted effort to displace departmental organization. Across all five schools, departments and subject affiliation are meaningful components of teachers’ work life. One measure of the competitive strength of academic and vocational subjects, then, is the individual and collective strength of their respective departments.

Departments define themselves and are defined by others as strong or weak. The definitions have multiple referents. When the chair of an industrial arts department judges his department to be very strong, he is referring to the members’ long-standing friendships and to their shared support for the nonacademic student. When an administrator judges the same department to be weak, he is recording his criticism of the department’s slim record of initiative in program innovation. Thus, internal and external judgments do not always coincide, nor do insiders and outsiders, teachers and administrators, always assess the salient elements of departmental strength in the same way. For some vocational teachers, congenial relations among peers are sufficient to outweigh low institutional prestige; for some teachers in academic departments, being rich in resources does not compensate for the absence of intellectual and professional accord. Overall, however, some conditions could be said to contribute to departmental strength and others to erode it.

**Department Composition**

One of the major contributors to departmental strength among the four English departments studied by Ball and Lacey (1984) was full-time participation by a cadre of subject specialists. Most academic departments in our five schools were able to preserve the full-time instructional services of their subject experts. That is, most teachers of math, science, social studies, and English taught full-time assignments within their subject specialty. Indeed, most of the drain of subject expertise from academic departments in these schools occurs not in the form of out-of-subject teaching but in the form of commitments to the school’s athletic program.

Vocational teachers, especially those with general secondary credentials, are more vulnerable to assignments outside their primary field. Sometimes those assignments require teaching as many as four periods a day in another subject (often math or science); in other instances, they require traveling between schools. In 1989–1990, for example, 21 teachers in the five schools were assigned to teach in two departments (exclusive of coaches). Of these, eight (38 percent) were from vocational subjects, although vocational teachers constitute only 12 percent of the teacher
work force. An additional three vocational teachers maintained their full-time assignment in their specialty by traveling between two schools.

In a heavily departmentalized structure, to lose subject specialists from a department is to weaken the social cohesion and programmatic unity needed to compete for resources; similarly, to admit to the department full- or part-time members who are not subject specialists is to weaken the department’s professional standing. One might envision an alternative configuration in which a group’s competitive standing is contingent on interdisciplinary strength rather than on single-subject strength. Such a shift cannot be managed on a subject-by-subject or department-by-department basis, however. It requires a uniform shift in the principle of organization—for example, to a house or career cluster model. Rancho High School did attempt a variant of a house configuration, but competition over resources within learning units remained tied to subject specialties.

Among academic departments, a shift in the composition of the department membership (more part-time teachers, for example) may occur independent of shifts in department size. In a case study report entitled “Are core subjects becoming a dumping ground for reassigned high school teachers?” Gehrke and Sheffield (1985) observed that in times of declining enrollment, academic courses are maintained through “reassignment” while courses that require special technical skills (for example, instrumental music and wood shop) are cut from the school program altogether. In our five schools, we found a similar phenomenon of teaching assignment following the shift in high school graduation requirements. In the wake of such developments, the remaining vocational teachers, especially in the industrial arts, tended to become vocational generalists (for example, teaching isolated sections of wood shop, metal shop, and drafting).

Thus, academic departments maintain or increase their size but lose their claim to subject expertise, while vocational departments lose both size and specialist depth. Each of the five schools has at least one one-person vocational department. At Oak Valley, the largest of the schools, the largest vocational department numbers 6, while the four core academic departments range in size from 14 to 25. At the remaining four schools, the maximal size of the vocational departments is 4; the maximal size of academic departments in the same schools is 14. And as vocational departments dwindle in size, little remains to link teachers together or to serve as a platform for cross-departmental work. A home economics teacher at Valley says:

As much as I would like to see the department growing, it seems to be diminishing. We really don’t have a full-time teacher. We just have the two courses. Possibly [if we had] a teacher and a half, that
would give you somebody to share your ideas, communicate with, that type of thing. . . . It would be different having somebody in the school, actually sharing what’s happening.

The school’s only business teacher compares her present isolation with past circumstances, in which she could count on others for stimulation. At a previous school, she says, “I had three other teachers, and we could bounce off each other. Here I don’t really have anyone yet. Because I’m the only business teacher, you know.”

The programmatic strength of a department thus begins with its membership: the pool of knowledge and experience available in the teachers who make up the department’s roster. In Oak Valley’s English department, all teachers are full-time members of the department who bring to their work extensive formal preparation in English. All members of the department are available to devote the majority of their time and energy to the teaching of English and the refinement of the English curriculum. The department’s policy of encouraging teachers to tackle a new course every couple of years has resulted in a faculty with a collective ability to teach widely in the department’s curriculum and across grade levels. In the industrial arts department, by contrast, only one of six teachers continues to teach a full-time load in his or her main area of expertise. The teachers pursue very separate specialties, ranging from electronics to auto and metal work, which add to the difficulty of relying on flexibility in staffing to achieve curriculum depth and continuity.

**Department Leadership**

The power of departments in secondary schools is enhanced by a formal provision for department leadership and is correspondingly diminished when no such provision is made. Two of the three districts that serve as home to our five schools support the position of department head; in both districts, the position is potentially one of substantial organizational and collegial leadership (although it is not always enacted in this way). The third district, in which Esperanza and Rancho are located, eliminated formal support for department heads several years ago. However, even within the former two districts, resources to support departmental leadership are not uniformly distributed and do not go uncontested. An industrial arts teacher typifies comments that we heard frequently regarding the vocational departments’ claim on resources for department leadership:

A lot of people think because we have [only] six people and because our department doesn’t have papers to grade, that the
department chairman doesn't have the load that the other department chairs do. But if you look at all the equipment that we have, to make sure that it stays [in repair]—you can't just come in and write a work order and expect it to happen. You've got to follow through.

An important influence on the department's professional and organizational presence is the leadership stance assumed by the department chair. In Oak Valley's English department, three successive chairs of the English department sound a common theme: The role of the chair is to sustain both the coherence of the curriculum and the cooperative spirit among teachers. Teachers compete for the position of chair on the basis of substantive expertise and ability to lead a group of respected experts. (There were three internal candidates for the position when it last came vacant.) The present chair of the industrial arts department, by contrast, describes a rotation in which "we all take our turn in the barrel." The main job of the chair in that department is to ensure appropriate and timely expenditures of the equipment budget. The chair of the business department reports that her position is "strictly a liaison with administration." A generally permissive or timid stance toward department leadership may prove detrimental to any department, but more so to those without other forceful advocates in the organization.

**Competition for Resources**

Departments in the same school may differ dramatically in the material resources that they command: space, equipment, up-to-date texts, supplemental materials, professional development monies, and the like. To some extent, the differences are felt within both academic and nonacademic arenas. As Siskin (1991) relates, for example, science departments are typically favored in the resource competition in ways that social studies departments are not. She traces the disparities between these academic departments in part to the external prestige of science, the tightness of scientific paradigms compared with those of social studies fields, the perceived legitimacy of claims regarding laboratory facilities and materials, and the relative scarcity of science teachers. Nonetheless, she concludes:

The status differences among these academic departments, however, are small, and often lie not in the automatic link to the discipline, but in the cultivated links to the administrators. The most intriguing glimpses of consequential differences in disciplinary status come from the departments not studied here, such as Industrial Arts. (pp. 207–208)
Siskin speculates that the most dramatic status differences and resource differences are to be found between the academic and nonacademic fields (vocational education, the arts, and special education). Her speculations are borne out in our interviews with vocational teachers, who are united in their view that their school’s discretionary resources go most readily to develop academic programs. At Rancho, the science chair confirms the status differential, observing that the math and science departments have received “the lion’s share of the funding.” He would not be surprised to hear an industrial arts teacher in the school lament, as he did to us:

We sometimes feel like we’re second-class citizens, probably because the English department, the math department, or social studies department, or science department can yell for more money, and they seem to get more money or more of the pie than their fair share, plus some.

Departmental strength is reflected in and maintained by successful claims to valued resources. Among the forces that contribute to a departmental presence in a school, neither department size nor subject prestige weighs on the side of the vocational departments. With regard to control over material resources, there is little doubt that academic departments reign in these five schools. However, departmental presence can also be felt by the intellectual and moral stance that a department adopts, individually and collectively, toward the work of teaching.

**Departmental Ethos and Boundaries**

Departments provide very different kinds of collegial homes for the teachers who inhabit them. A small number of prior studies offer widely varying portraits of departments and department leadership. The department heads and teachers interviewed by Johnson (1990) claim that department members are engaged extensively in joint activity on matters of curriculum and instruction. However, in his study of staff networks in two Midwestern high schools, Cusick (1982) concluded that departments were principally instruments of administrative convenience. They offered neither pressure nor support for teachers to adopt a coherent stance toward curriculum and instruction; indeed, they had little to do with the intellectual and professional lives of the teachers assigned to them. Both of these portraits come to life again in our own data (see also Bruckerhoff, 1991). Teachers and administrators in these schools readily and vividly define individual departments by their characteristic stance toward subject, stu-
dents, and schooling. Here, for example, an English teacher and a social studies teacher who teach in the same school present drastically different portraits of their respective departments.

**English Teacher:** I came here [to interview], and I was really impressed right away with the teachers that were here in the English department. . . . They were really energetic and involved in what they were doing . . . sharing ideas about what they were doing in class, what was working, showing students' work. . . . It's very cooperative.

**Social Studies Teacher:** There is no agreement in the department on what is important, no agreement on standards, no agreement on priorities. The faculty is out there floating. People are just putting in time.

In the English department office, one finds a group picture prominently displayed on the wall, and teacher traffic is heavy throughout the day. Conversations among teachers are frequent and lively. The social studies office, located nearby, is nearly empty of teacher traffic, and there is nothing in the physical environment that would suggest close personal or professional relations among the department's members.

Of course, there is no necessary relation between personal closeness in a department and a disposition to act collectively in regard to teaching. Nonetheless, social cohesion may dispose a department more readily to cooperate on educational pursuits when the occasion arises. The English department prides itself on being open; it is not unusual to find substitute teachers gravitating to the English department to have lunch, regardless of what subject they are covering for the day. The department members also welcomed members of our research team, making time for us to have informal conversations and making room for us at the lunch table. Student teachers and other teachers new to the department commented on the warm and cooperative environment they discovered. This large English department promotes a sense of belonging among its immediate members, but its boundaries remain permeable. Other departments, including social studies, preserved a more formal stance toward strangers and newcomers, as well as toward colleagues from neighboring departments.

This English department represents perhaps the clearest case of a department dedicated to a coherent program of studies to which most or all teachers contribute. Individual autonomy exists within the context of collective agreements regarding curriculum emphasis and, to a lesser extent, instructional preferences. Teaching assignments traced over a 3-year period reveal a departmental commitment to displace conventional
patterns of individual course ownership with teachers’ widespread knowledge of and participation in the broader curriculum. The chair explains:

We started something a couple of years ago where every teacher is not forced but encouraged to pick up a new prep every other year. And the idea behind that one is that courses didn’t become so specialized to teachers that if a teacher were to leave the department and all of a sudden the course, you know, somebody’s stuck teaching it and doesn’t really know how it’s supposed to go and all that. [We] tried to remove the idea of special-interest classes and say, “Look, if it’s in our department then it’s worth being taught, and so let’s have people who can teach it.”

Course offerings, staffing patterns, and course coordination all serve as policy mechanisms that may spur or impede collaborative activity within or across departments. Despite the large size of this English department, teachers attain a remarkable familiarity with one another’s teaching and a remarkable level of genuine agreement about their departmental priorities. They are supported in this achievement by their inclination to see themselves as engaged in a common task (college preparation), to underlay their subspecialties and concentrate on commonalities in the broader discipline, and to promote strong curricular leadership from within their own ranks.

In some respects, the differences between strong departments and weak departments appear to be quite independent of subject matter. The English department at Oak Valley is a powerhouse; the same subject department at Esperanza is badly polarized. Our investigations of life inside departments over the past 3 years have led us to believe that school-level measures of departmentalization and collegiality are likely to be misleading or at best they offer an incomplete picture of the various bases of colleagueship in a secondary school. Within the same school, we find some departments that are powerful instruments of curricular policy and other departments that provide no more than an administrative label for a loose assemblage of individuals. (Indeed, reducing the wide range of variation and increasing the normative power of collegiality would appear to be crucial elements of a reform strategy.) Vocational departments appear no more or no less inclined than academic departments to take a collective stand on curricular priorities or to supply one another with professional support.

There remain, however, certain systematic differences between academic and vocational departments. That is, there are forces that tend more
often than not to weaken vocational departments compared with academic departments. Academic and nonacademic departments are positioned differently to act as instruments of curriculum policy and as guarantors of staffing and program configurations. At Oak Valley High School, for example, the consumer/family studies (home economics) department bears a certain resemblance to the English department in its effort to achieve a certain curricular coherence. The department’s course offerings reflect a decision to employ state funds to develop a set of occupationally oriented programs in restaurant management, early childhood education, and fashion merchandising. However, unlike the English department, where teachers set out to learn courses across the department’s curriculum and where teacher turnover would have only marginal impact on the course offerings or core content, the consumer/family studies department relies on individually developed one-person programs. It is therefore less flexible in its options for staffing, and its program continuity is vulnerable to teacher turnover. (Indeed, the fashion merchandising program was abandoned when the teacher who organized it left the school.) In the industrial arts department, too, each of six teachers pursues a single specialty. Faced with declining enrollments, the department has devoted resources to helping individual teachers develop alternative courses but has made no collective moves to reconsider and consolidate its curricular priorities.

Across all five schools, academic departments appear stronger than vocational departments in the overall competition for symbolic, human, and material resources. In schools where academic achievement and preparation for college attract the greatest concentration of symbolic and material resources, vocational departments are seen as backwaters. Vocational teachers are more vulnerable to split assignments and are more likely to travel between schools than are teachers in academic departments. Vocational teachers’ motivation and opportunity for intensive participation in a department are diminished as their vocational departments are less able to act as guarantors of preferred teaching assignments, breadth and depth of course offerings, and full-time department membership.

Departments exude a certain spirit, one that varies widely both within and between schools. They also confront quite different conditions of teaching. The conditions supportive of departmental collegiality include a full complement of subject specialists; a subsidized and meaningful department head position; a budget adequate to encompass both program development and professional development; a coherent stance toward curriculum policy; and norms supportive of collective problem solving, innovation, and intellectual growth.
AMONG COLLEAGUES

Subject affiliation and departmental membership powerfully define professional community in these comprehensive high schools. They do not, of course, exhaust the possibilities. In a six-period instructional day, most teachers spend five periods in the classroom. They come together in the moments before the school day begins or in the passing periods between classes, in an assigned preparation period, at lunch, and at the occasional after-school meeting. Against a backdrop of departmental preoccupations and classroom privacy, one can detect considerable variations in the nature and extent of teachers’ professional and personal relations with one another. Some teachers can be found in their classrooms throughout the day, even at lunch. They venture out only to collect mail from the office or to attend required meetings. Others seem not isolated at all; when not in class, they are immersed in a round of lively and nearly continuous exchange with colleagues on topics ranging from student work or classroom activities to family matters, sports, and the state of the economy. Greetings exchanged in passing and stories told in the moments between classes convey some sense of a backstage life among the school’s adults. Some individuals and groups exude openness; others exude a stiff reserve. Some colleagues supply one another with primarily a warm and congenial personal environment; others provide professional advice, ideas, or collaboration on new ideas or projects. Friendships and occasionally feuds may span decades and may extend well beyond the school walls.

The collegial environment is in many ways more dynamic, fluid, and complex than might be anticipated by dwelling on the closed classroom door or on the boundaries constructed by subject and departmental loyalties. Yet in the relations between academic teachers and their vocational colleagues, the dominant theme is one of division: a general physical, social, and educational isolation that separates vocational from academic teachers and a pattern of competition over student enrollment and other resources. Overall, the organization of time, space, curriculum, and students tends to separate individual teachers from one another, further separate teachers considered academic from those in nonacademic specialties, and intensify the departmental basis of professional community.

Teachers do not all respond to isolation and subject segmentation in the same ways. It would be a mistake to think of the vocational teachers as chafing for greater involvement while academic teachers serve as obstructionists. Indeed, the themes introduced by the vocational teachers are consistent with those sounded throughout the secondary teacher population. For some, the privacy of the classroom engenders a sense of entrepreneurial pride—a sense that one’s program is an individual accomplish-
ment and the basis for professional esteem. For others, programmatic isolation is offset by satisfactions achieved elsewhere. Thus, one business teacher chooses to remain in her computer lab most of the school day but finds sufficient opportunity for collegial exchange in regularly scheduled department meetings. Others settle for a version of benign neglect or the absence of overt conflict. One home economics teacher says of her school’s faculty, “There’s not too much that we have in common, but I have no complaints about the other teachers.” And still others pursue an idiosyncratic but cosmopolitan array of relationships and activities.

The general congeniality and warmth among teachers at most of these schools do little to relieve an underlying competitive reality that centers on student enrollment. As Connell (1985) and others portray the situation, such competition is not grounded in individual dispositions but in a policy orientation that favors the academic curriculum. State and local policy developments throughout the past decade have expanded the academic course requirements for high school graduation and have narrowed the time available for students to pursue elective courses (especially electives deemed nonacademic).

Vocational teachers compete with one another and with academic teachers for sufficient student enrollment to sustain a full-time teaching assignment. In doing so, they often underscore the separation of academic purposes and nonacademic purposes. In the competition for enrollment, courses that meet requirements or courses that can offer academic credit are advantaged. When the art department refused to award art credit to a photography course taught in the industrial arts department, the industrial arts teachers were at risk of losing photography altogether. To maintain their class sections, they were pressed toward a course description that emphasized a vocational orientation:

It was vocational skill training. We geared them in that direction.

... This is for professional ends. These are the vocational areas that you want. For us, we believe time lines in getting stuff in are as important as the composition and the color and the lines and the repetition, the value, the art structure. We’ve all pretty much agreed in that area.

Relegated to the marginal realm of an electives department, vocational teachers employ a variety of means to market individual courses and programs to administrators and students. Vocational teachers are left largely to their own devices to sustain a full-time teaching assignment composed of courses that both they and their students find satisfying. Observers of high schools have drawn attention to the ways in which aca-
ademic teachers' own entrepreneurial activities could result in small empires or market niches of quite idiosyncratic course offerings that preserve student enrollment and maintain teacher interest but compromise broader purposes. To the extent that we find collaboration, we find it turned inward, with members of a department working together to consolidate a favored position in the competition over students and other resources. That is, a survival orientation drives collaboration internal to a department and constrains collaboration across departments.

In principle, entrepreneurial ventures or crossover assignments might provide the occasion for joint planning, might foster more extensive and intensive forms of collegial exchange, and might open up possibilities for experiments with an interdisciplinary curriculum. We have no evidence that they have done so in these cases. Broad questions of institutional purpose are thus obscured, and capacities for curriculum policy at the district, school, and departmental level are diminished.

**CONCLUSION**

Three aspects of professional community underscore and sustain the two worlds of academic and nonacademic teachers. Each is a potential guarantor of the status quo or a potential lever of change. First is the legacy of subject specialization and the conditions surrounding subject expertise and subject status. Second is the departmental organization of the high school and the way in which it opens up or closes down opportunities for a more unifying construction of secondary schooling. And last is the generalized pattern of patchwork involvement among colleagues and the collegial dynamic fostered by competition over student enrollment and other resources.

In increasing numbers of local communities, one finds a creeping unease about the failures of secondary schooling. Some proposed remedies, to be sure, tend in the direction of doing more of the same. They intensify pressures on teachers and students by specifying more time, more courses, more homework, and more tests. Other remedies require a reexamination of fundamental purposes, practices, and structures. They call into question aspects of schooling on which secondary teachers' identity and community have been based, among them subject specialism, age grading, and differentiated curricula. It is within this emerging field of debate that one best locates problems in the integration of vocational and academic education.

We undertook this analysis of teachers' professional community—or more precisely, communities—in part to discover on what basis such inte-
igration of purposes and subjects might be founded. In these schools, at least, we find the language of subject specialisms dominant and the structure of departments firmly in place. A few teachers and administrators envision more permeable boundaries between departments, more meaningful ties across subject areas, and more sensible relations between school and work. Among the academic teachers, however, there are few examples of cross-subject curriculum planning. Initiatives that could properly be judged interdisciplinary are simply not present in these schools on any meaningful scale. Among the vocational teachers, the assault on subject boundaries takes the form of campaigns to win academic credit for vocational courses. Cross-department staffing between vocational departments and academic departments (such as when industrial arts teachers are assigned to teach basic math) tends to be seen as an accommodation to existing course demands rather than as pursuit of a policy that favors cross-disciplinary work or that seeks a more robust integration of academic and vocational perspectives. The kinds of fully integrative models proposed by Grubb, Davis, Lum, Plhal, & Morgaine (1991) are not in evidence here.

Those who would venture seriously to alter the character of secondary schooling in the manner undertaken by Sizer's (1992) fictional Franklin High School must contend not only with long-standing assumptions or stereotypes about students and learning, but also with long-standing features of teaching as an occupational and organizational community. Collegial exchange is both more frequent and more varied than outsiders might imagine and less concentrated and less consequential than teachers would require to reinvent their work and their workplace. The departmentalization and subject affiliations that remain powerful facts of life in secondary schools are sustained not only by the dispositions of individuals but also by a range of internal practices and by powerful externalities. Ironically, the very resources that give some departments their strength may operate as obstacles to efforts to create more open boundaries among subject disciplines. For example, a department with a full-time cadre of subject specialists and well-established curricular policies might also be so committed to subject integrity that it would act as a barrier to more broadly conceived secondary curricula. And among the external forces, for example, university admission requirements exercise what Grubb (personal communication) terms a “chilling effect” on innovation in the secondary curriculum. Teachers might be driven to modify their subject orientations and commitments if the university were to require evidence that students had participated in cross-disciplinary coursework or had engaged in projects that required integrating their knowledge from multiple disciplines (a complex problem in urban planning, for example).

Whatever impetus that teachers themselves feel for “redesigning the
American high school,” as Sizer (1992) casts it, resides primarily in the
shifting composition of the student population, especially in urban dis-
tricts, and in the escalating cry that schools are failing their students.
Another impetus to change, felt less directly by teachers but introduced by
the larger community of parents and employers, is the changing nature of
the work and workplace that await the young. In the eyes of most reform-
ers, the impetus to change is weakened in part by the conservative force of
teachers’ subject loyalties and schools’ departmentalized structures. That
view rings true. At the same time, long-standing divisions between the
worlds of the academic and the vocational teacher are fundamentally at
odds with the values central to public education. It is in the tensions sur-
rounding such value commitments that the possibilities for change reside.
In each of these schools, and perhaps in the many others like them, the
multiplicity of perspectives and practices offer more resources for reform
than we have so far been able to tap.

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