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## THE CINEMATIC COLLEGE PROFESSOR: CONCEPTIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

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Dr. Jeffrey Bieber, Director of Graduate Studies

THE CINEMATIC COLLEGE PROFESSOR: CONCEPTIONS AND  
REPRESENTATIONS

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Education  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
John Chandler Fitch III

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Beth Goldstein, Associate Professor of Educational Policy Studies and  
Evaluation

Lexington, Kentucky

2018

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### THE CINEMATIC COLLEGE PROFESSOR: CONCEPTIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

Depictions of college professors in American films are common, and while a number of studies have investigated various aspects of college life in motion pictures, few have focused exclusively on the cinematic professoriate. In addition to being an indelible part of history, cinematic depictions of college professors are part of the national discourse on the role and function of the faculty and university. An investigation of how college professors have been represented in American films, and how these representations are read and created by real-life college professors and filmmakers may provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between popular culture images and academia. This project consists of three sections. The first focuses on the trajectories of negative representations of college professors in popular American films from 1970-2016. The second examines interview responses of film professors to on-screen depictions of college faculty. The third presents a case study of professorial depictions by a group of filmmakers who created a feature length film about a college professor. As various public stakeholders are increasingly questioning the role of the college professor and the institution of higher education, this project seeks to examine the influence of popular professor images and cultural influences on the conceptions of two

interpretive communities – one that embodies the professoriate and one that creates images surrounding it. Moreover, this project considers these depictions within film marketplace and popular culture contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** Motion Pictures, College Professors, Filmmakers,  
Interpretive Communities, Film Analysis

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John Chandler Fitch III

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April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018

THE CINEMATIC COLLEGE PROFESSOR: CONCEPTIONS AND  
REPRESENTATIONS

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April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Depictions of college professors in popular American motion pictures have been common since the pre-production code era of the studio system. *Horse Feathers* (1932), *College Humor* (1933), and *The Wild Party* (1929) provided seminal representations of cinematic American universities and its denizens, including faculty. Since then, mainstream and independent films of nearly all genres have featured professor characters. From *Swing it, Professor* (1937) to *Arrival* (2016), hundreds of on-screen professors have been depicted in various ways: heroes and heroines, villains, cads, love interests, bumbling idiots, and experts. Much of the published literature on the subject has focused on the history of all college-related films and how they present various aspects of university life (e.g. Umphlett, 1984; Conklin, 2008). A few publications have examined the depictions of the professoriate in various genres or time periods (Papke, 2003; Oliker, 1993; Kirby, 2014). Others have taken a more critical approach by tracing the depictions of professors in light of cultural and social forces over time. Some assert that such representations have grown more negative in recent years (Long, 1996; Reynolds, 2014; Overall, 2010), but to date, none have exclusively studied films that feature professors in leading or supporting lead roles, “college professor films.”

Moreover, previous research has not explored how subject area experts in film – such as film professors or filmmakers – conceive of real-life and filmic professors. Research on how these educators and content creators respond to faculty portrayals in popular films may contribute to an understanding of the current public discourse surrounding higher education – one punctuated by recent trends, such as exponential

increases in tuition and fees for millions of students, a burgeoning student loan crisis, increasing public scrutiny, and declines in state financial support.

In an effort to address the lack of research on the cinematic professor and to further understand how on screen representations of higher education faculty are created and sustained, the following three manuscripts focus solely on “college professor films” and consider three fundamental questions. First, have depictions of college professors in American college professor films grown more negative over the past five decades? Second, how do real-life professors of film studies respond to cinematic depictions of college professors? Third, what informs how filmmakers construct depictions of college professors in a college professor film? Through a formalist analysis of college professor films, interviews with film faculty, and a case study of a college professor film production team, this project seeks to answer these questions and to provide a unique contribution to the existing literature.

The first paper, *Negative Projections of Professors on Film from Altamont to the Obama Era, 1970-2016*, examines negative depictions in 25 popular and critically acclaimed American college professor films – five for each decade – since 1970. The second paper, *Film Faculty on Faculty Films: Instructors, makers, and users*, considers the responses of thirteen full-time, currently employed film professors from a variety of U.S. institutions who were interviewed about representations of faculty in popular films. The third paper, *Making a College Professor Film: A case study*, focuses on a group of filmmakers who collaborated on a recent college professor film. Taken together, these three projects consider how changes in the cinematic representations of faculty intersect with a number of factors; the personal experiences and conceptions of real-life professors

and filmmakers, the reappearance of professor archetypes, the reproduction of collegiate stereotypes on screen, recent pressures on higher education, motion picture market demands, and changes in technology and audience expectations.

## **SECTION 2: NEGATIVE PROJECTIONS OF PROFESSORS ON FILM FROM ALTAMONT TO THE OBAMA ERA, 1970-2016**

While many observers of American popular culture assert that the boozy, philandering, lazy, and absent minded college professor character has become part of our collective cultural imagination (Kirsch, 2013; Deresiewicz, 2007; Reynolds, 2014), eliciting either prurient fascination or moral panic, surprisingly little has been written about how this negative stereotype operates in motion pictures. In fact, oftentimes these depictions are taken as a given – deeply entrenched and ubiquitous stereotypes that provide storytellers with convenient dramatic and comedic premises, regardless of their verisimilitude. Some researchers contend that these cinematic presentations reflect prevailing public conceptions and expectations of the professorate and academia in general, and that things are getting worse. Moreover, journalists, scholars, film critics, and college faculty have claimed that the cinematic college professor is more depressed, depraved, and downtrodden than ever before (Williams, 2010; DiPaolo, 2015; Craft, 2012). Yet, evidence that supports the increasingly negative portrayals of cinematic college professors is incomplete and lacking in subtlety. In fact, the type of negativity associated with professor characters may be changing, rather than the amount of negativity. These cinematic changes accompany dramatic shifts to the funding and operation of real life academic institutions and the economic and social positioning of faculty. This project will attempt to clarify the negativity observed in such representations by investigating a sample of “college professor films” that have been critical and popular successes in each decade since 1970.

## Negative Characters and Negative Portrayals

Heroic behavior on screen is often associated with brave, noble, selfless, morally righteous, emotionally and physically fit protagonists who bring positive changes to a difficult situation. Characters who do not fit this bill are often considered negative. Moreover, characters who deviate from culturally sanctioned norms can also elicit negative responses from audience members. Previously published studies on negative representations of television and film characters have employed several different criteria for identifying negativity, including the degree to which a character was dirty or clean, well-groomed or disheveled, casually or professionally attired, aggressive, lazy, articulate, or loud (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), attractive, intelligent, friendly, romantically active (Bazzini, et. al., 1997), violent, asocial (Wilson, et. al., 1999), sexually active, “good,” and aggressive (McIntosh, et. al., 1998). Many of these criteria suggest that negative portrayals are considered as such due to depicted actions that violate socially consecrated expectations of prosocial, or “normal” behavior. However, they also suggest that appearances matter to viewers as well. In audience studies across various academic disciplines – such as the ones cited above – study subjects rated the attire, movements, and speech of characters as indicative of their essential “goodness.” Moreover, TV and film viewers do not only evaluate characters based on what they do, but also by what happens to them. For example, both Bazzini and McIntosh asked viewers to assess the relative negativity of the representation by the “outcome” at the end of the film – whether or not the external conditions remained the same, declined, or improved for that character. Since films explicitly rely on conflict and drama, characters experience both negative and positive events and outcomes, yet many audiences have a

propensity to view an unfortunate character as a negative one. Bazzini, et. al. suggest that this may be an effect of the *just world phenomenon* – the belief that good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad ones (Lerner, 1980).

As with many forms of art and popular entertainment, discerning the difference between good and bad characters and narrative events is not always easy. In the case of an anti-heroic character, audiences may enjoy the tension that arises from the conflict between the character's actions and their professed moral code. At other times, viewers may be presented with characters and fictional situations that spark a number of conflicting emotional responses. In these cases, filmmakers and reviewers might label a film or a character as “emotionally complex” – one that challenges viewers to experience a number of emotions at once or to recognize both “good” and “bad” simultaneously. Films considered emotionally complex are not usually mass-marketed blockbusters, but rather independent dramas with smaller productions and marketing budgets – projects that may challenge dominant social conventions or deal with topics outside of the mainstream. Similarly, many of these types of *indie* projects contain performances that are labeled “subtle” by critics and filmmakers alike. In these cases, subtlety is the opposite of what some call “heavy handed” or “on the nose” presentations, wherein the story's plot and motivations of the characters is explicit and obvious to all viewers, regardless of their “sophistication.” Subtlety is associated with nuance, the understated, that which is not obvious. Again, film critics commonly reserve this description for small, independent dramas without big movie stars and blockbuster budgets. In these cases, the film's subtlety and emotional complexity may highlight the ambiguity inherent in classifying human characters as negative or positive. Sometimes, the smaller films

overtly challenge the Manichaeian sensibility that informs many mainstream productions.

However, bad behavior is often recognized as bad by any standard. Transgressive behavior is understood as consisting of actions that deviate from social norms (Giguère, Lalonde, & Taylor, 2014), or that disregard some kind of cultural taboo (Hendershot, 2001). While cinematic anti-hero figures, exploitation, and cult film characters are sometimes meant to be admired for their transgressive actions (Shafer & Raney, 2012; Fitch, 2004, Eden, et. al., 2016), anti-social behavior, mannerisms, appearance, and attire are usually associated with negative characterizations. In some films, the depicted negative behavior either violates a law or code that is explicitly stated in the film, or implicitly recognized as transgressive in real life. In many of these cases, the violation unambiguously places the transgressor in a negative light. Murder, deception, and theft have endured as socially unacceptable acts in most contexts (with exceptions for combat films and some thrillers, adventure stories, and comedies). In other texts, the “lawbreaker” is presented as a righteous iconoclast who seeks to advance a morally just social or educational cause by doing battle with a corrupt status quo. For example, in *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the main characters are heralded as progressive teachers railing against a repressive and regressive institutional hegemony. Their transgressive behavior is sympathetically depicted as a self-sacrificial act necessary for the emotional and intellectual development of their students, or perhaps even the evolution of an enlightened, progressive society.

Yet, it’s not just the depicted actions and dialogue that account for a character’s negativity. For decades, formal film theorists have maintained that formal cinematic techniques are essential building blocks for characterization, and scholars from other



disciplines have supported that premise. In a study that measured the negative depictions of mentally ill characters, Wilson (1999) observes that:

In television dramas, as in cinema, characters are created by appearance, words and actions as well as the responses of other characters to them. The impact of these features can be heightened or moderated by shot selection, setting, sound, lighting and other technical aspects of the production. These, in our argument, are discursive resources contributing to the broadcast depiction (p. 233).

Other scholars have documented the importance of cinematic techniques such as cinematography (Coplan, 2006), music (Cohen, 2001) editing (Carroll, 1993), and lighting (Poland, 2015; Smith, 2003) on generating emotion, affecting attitudes, and shaping characters (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2013). Thus, the traditional film viewing experience is not just about plot or theme or story. Rather, it is an experience that relies upon the simultaneous apprehension of sights and sounds, and its creators use a number of highly stylized techniques to manipulate the emotions of the audience members (Tan, 2013). By adding formal analysis to a consideration of plot summaries, story details and scripted action, a more detailed determination of negative portrayals may be possible – one that addresses the unique nature of the motion picture.

### **Review of Literature**

While several researchers have written widely about depictions of teachers in high school films (Bulman, 2005; Dalton, 2010; Shary, 2014; Trier, 2001; Bulman, 2002; Beyersbach, 2005; Dalton & Linder, 2008), far fewer have published work on films set in higher education. The reason for this is unclear, but may be related to a disproportionate amount of public attention on publicly funded, compulsory K-12 schools, and the

traditionally elite nature of higher education. At any rate, a few researchers have offered investigations on films that feature college life. In *The Movies Go to College* (1984), Wiley Lee Umphlett provides a comprehensive production history of college films from the 1920's to 1979, and suggests – like many *mass communication* and *audience studies* scholars - that these movies reflect and indicate “our cultural values and our popular fads and notions.” (p. 11). Widely cited by other researchers, this study makes reference to 237 college films and chronicles how the genre has evolved to respond to societal changes and market demands. In *Campus Life in the Movies* (2008), John E. Conklin also begins with the movies of the 1920's, analyzing 681 films released between 1920 and 2005 that include some kind of portrayal of college life. Unlike Umphlett, Conklin does not provide a straightforward historical chronology. Instead, he identifies nine aspects of the collegiate experience that are regularly represented in his sample, and (like Umphlett) asserts that Hollywood films shape “popular perceptions of our colleges and universities and the students who attend them,” (p. 1) claiming that these movies both mirror and distort the reality of college life. Similarly, Dittus (2007), after analyzing college-based films of the 1990's, suggested that they may reflect the dominant views of the American public toward higher education and, in turn, may influence higher education stakeholders. Others who have written about collegiate films have made similar arguments. Thomas (2009), claims that the nearly universally accessible popular films of *Hollywood's Classical Age* and *Postwar period* exerted and continue to exert a powerful influence on American audiences. Similarly, Kirby (2014) suggests that popular films set in educational settings significantly influence public perceptions.

None of these authors provide evidence for such claims, but a few others have

sought to identify and demonstrate a direct connection between higher education films and audience attitudes and expectations. Wasylikiw and Currie (2012) compared questionnaire responses of students who had viewed a popular college film with those who viewed a non-college film, and found evidence that viewing college films may change student attitudes toward risky behavior and their expectations of college life. The authors further suggest that film can impact public attitudes and that these attitudes may influence the behavior of individuals. Tucciarone-Mackin (2004) completed a comparable study that combined a content analysis of the film *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) with surveys of undergraduates and an interview with the film's screenwriter to investigate the relationships between the film and real experiences of collegiate life. She suggests that college films shape the perceptions of potential and future college students and "blur the boundaries between 'reel' college and 'real' college." (p. 192).

Rather than investigating a direct influence of films on contemporary audiences, David B. Hinton (*Celluloid Ivy: Higher Education in the Movies 1960-1990*, 1994) approaches higher education films as reflective artifacts - what he calls "time capsules" that serve as historical texts that provide greater understanding of social phenomenon to future generations. Hinton examines 55 college movies released between 1960 and 1990 and discusses how they respond to what he calls the "American myth of higher education." This myth - upward social mobility is possible through higher education, despite social class, race, or gender - resonates with the traditional American ideals of meritocracy, hard work, and social improvement through individual effort. In his sample, Hinton traces the appearance and eventual disappearance of this myth in college films,

and identifies shades of anti-intellectualism and negative portrayals of undergraduate education and professors.

Complaints about negative depictions of the professoriate are nothing new (Umphlett, 1984), but research that focuses solely on the representations of college professors on film – rather than about college in general - is scant. Thomas (2009) investigated the cinematic treatment of college professors in comedic films between 1925 and 1951, and found that most cinematic professors in the sample were white, male, eccentric 40-something year olds who were paid a relatively low salary. Papke (2003) studied the portrayal of law professors from classic Hollywood films and identified a number of recurrent character types, such as the crusading hero, the devoted teacher, and the sympathetic failure. Oliker (1993) identified “trends in the popular image of education” (p. 72) by examining the changes to portrayals of cinematic instructors since the 1930’s. Tracking these changes by decade, he identified a number of instructor character types that resonated with popular, contemporaneous conceptions of real life education (e.g. *The Heroic Era: The 1930’s*; *The Age of Paranoia: The 1940s*). Similarly, Kirby (2014) traces the appearance of science professors and scientists in film by decade since 1900, finding a number of shifting characterizations – from mad scientists to absent minded professors to heroic scientists.

Long (1996) considers negative portrayals and their association with American anti-intellectualism, claiming that the depictions are growing worse, and that these negative messages “reflect dissatisfaction and an eventual mandate for change.” (p. 36). Reynolds (2007) analyzed 63 films produced between 1930 and 1950, determining that many of these films cast college professors as “others” who are neither trusted nor

respected by society in general. Seven years later, Reynolds (2014) discussed the recent increase in university and college-based narratives in literature, television, and film. After examining the various representations of faculty in popular culture, she suggested that content creators such as filmmakers and screenwriters are to blame for the negative portrayals of professors - they “mis-educate” the public about the reality of academic work and academic professionals.

Recently, some writers – who, at times, are also college professors – have claimed that newer cinematic portrayals of the professoriate have grown increasingly pessimistic. Christine Overall (2010) is especially critical, claiming that in popular media, professors are:

...almost always male. They’re absent-minded and out of touch with the “real world.” They usually teach English or creative writing. They do very little work, except to exchange quips with a class that is seldom larger than about 25 students. The professors, all middle-aged, often try to “hook up” with their young students. We never see them preparing classes, serving on committees, writing papers, or marking students’ work. (p. 1).

Williams (2010) asserts that films of the early 2000’s presented instructors who are either “depressed or downtrodden” or affluent celebrity academics who reap financial rewards from TV appearances and popular book sales. Recalling brighter depictions of affable absent-minded researchers and lovable lecturers, Williams bemoans the abundance of recent negative depictions. Similarly, Yaffe (2015) laments the unrealistic and negative portrayals of his own profession in many Woody Allen films. DiPaolo (2015) takes an historical view, claiming that Hollywood has frequently stereotyped professors as

“drunken, misanthropic perverts” who produce nothing meaningful or useful for society. He cites relatively recent productions, *Smart People* (2008), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Wit* (2001), and *The Visitor* (2007) as some of the most egregious examples of this poor treatment. However, much of this previous research is based upon a very small selection of films from a fairly homogenous sample – small, independent films that are generally more prone to include pessimistic and/or hyper-realistic portrayals of characters from all sorts of professions, not just academia. Furthermore, some of these studies are poorly designed. They do not provide clear film selection criteria, they fail to adequately define what constitutes negativity, or they ignore variations in the type of negativity portrayed. However, if some depictions have indeed been growing more negative as of late, the trend coincides with recent data on public opinions toward college professors – at least for one side of the political spectrum. A series of Pew Research polls observed a dramatic decline in attitudes toward colleges and universities since 2015 among republicans, regardless of educational attainment. During the same period, democrats’ attitudes toward higher education improved steadily (Sharp Partisan Divisions, 2017). Additionally, Conservative republican views toward college professors were significantly “colder” than those of democrats, among all educational levels. (Fingerhut, 2017).

### **The Dark Side**

While some academic observers have discussed these on screen stereotypes (Roberts 2010), others have taken the possibility of a real-life problem seriously. Thoreson (1984) asserts that college professors are especially vulnerable to alcohol abuse. Citing the unusual amount of job security ensured by tenure, a dearth of supervision and oversight, boredom borne of solitary work, and a post-tenure middle-

aged slump, he claims that the professorate is an ideal space for the budding alcoholic to freely exercise their addiction. According to Thoreson, in addition to the flexible work schedule, academic-alcoholics are protected by social conventions that may excuse them of the erratic behaviors that often accompany over indulgence. From the archetypal creative genius to the disheveled, sweater vest-clad professor, traditional conceptions of professors and their work – often mysterious to the layman and student alike – allow individuals at risk to avoid undue scrutiny by their supervisors and their students.

Machell (1988), like Thoreson, explores the hazards of the professorial life and introduces his clinically-inspired term, *professorial melancholia* (PM). Machell's PM is a "progressive emotional process characterized by the negating of a university professor's professional motivation, positive attitudinal focus, and personal self-esteem" (p. 6).

Machell - a mental health and addiction researcher - claims that, due to the unique nature of academia, college instructors are especially prone to a number of irrational beliefs that fuel feelings of imperfection and inadequacy. Too much time alone, limited upward mobility, and the competitive nature of academic publishing and/or tenure can lead to a kind of emotional dysfunction unobserved in other professions.

Etzel, Lantz, & Yura (1996) provided evidence of the particular stresses of academia, finding that college faculty and staff identify work as the primary source of stress, and that tobacco and alcohol were the most frequently used chemical substances.

Roman (1980), Donovan (1990), and Leung (1980) found that frequent alcohol and marijuana use is widespread among university professors and that identification of addiction and treatment is difficult in the academic setting. The research on this topic is slim and it fails to compare rates of drug and alcohol abuse to other professions.

However, the suggestion that professors are susceptible to risky behaviors abounds in popular culture. At first glance, American films about college professors appear to reflect this notion. Depictions of sodden instructors abound. From *Ball of Fire* (1941), to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966) to *The Wonder Boys* (2000), many films feature professor characters who like to party more than they like to teach. In fact, most films set at universities include scenes set at cocktail receptions, wine and cheese art gallery openings, house parties, fraternity and sorority parties, and bars. In many of these cases, the professor character is keeping up with his students – drink by drink – and sometimes they will even have a bottle stashed in their office desk. In some films, the professor protagonist is clearly a bon vivant whose party life borders the criminal world (*21*, 2008; *Doctor Detroit*, 1983). In other cases, the drinking and drugging professor is presented as an amiable, aging student figure who seemingly never really moved on from graduate school (*National Lampoon's Animal House*, 1978).

Several recent cinematic depictions suggest that all is not well within the minds of those who live the life of the mind. In *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (2004), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *The Visitor* (2008), *Smart People* (2008), *A Single Man* (2009), *A Serious Man*, (2009), *The Sublime and Beautiful* (2014), and *Irrational Man* (2015), the professor protagonists are depressed, angst-ridden, suicidal, alcoholic, or struggling through a midlife or mid-career crisis. In *Still Alice* (2015) and *Wit* (2001), the leading characters are professors facing illnesses that threaten their life and career. The malaise of these cinematic instructors is reflected in some recent research on the real-life professorate and it appears that one sector of the profession is especially stressed. A large 2012 study by the Harvard-based Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher



Education found that associate professors are significantly unhappier with their work than assistant and full professors (Wilson, 2012). Similarly, A 2008 survey administered by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* found that the mid-career post-tenure blues are real for many, even at institutions that have good records among faculty. Respondents who completed the “Great Colleges to Work For” survey were happiest at the beginning and end of their careers, and least happy after receiving tenure (Selingo, 2008). Those with the post-tenured rank of associate make up about a third of all tenured and tenure-track professors in the nation – a large sector of the workforce (Wilson, 2012).

This is reflected in the amount of ink spilled on the subject by insiders. Veteran professors like Kathryn Blanchard (2012), Lawrence Douglas and Alexander George (2003) have written about their own experiences with “post-tenure depression,” and David Perlmutter (2010) provides suggestions on how to combat it. Perhaps the recent spate of college professor films accurately reflects the grim realities of the academic workplace for mid-career and part-time faculty (Patton, 2012). While the literature on real-life college professors contains some works on the subject (Cassidy, 2005; Williams, 2010; Deresiewicz, 2007), there is very little written about how the phenomenon is presented on film, or the attendant suggestion that academia has become an increasingly dire place for faculty.

Perhaps one of the most iconic cultural representations of the college professor is the cad. Predominantly male, this opportunistic figure uses his power, prestige and position to seduce students into a sexual relationship (Deresiewicz, 2007; Kirsch, 2013; Reynolds, 2014; Roiphe, 2015). At times, these cinematic trysts will evolve into a serious romantic relationship, even marriage. At other times, they remain dalliances that are

emblematic of the moral and ethical shortcomings of the instructor. In many films, the student-professor relationship is extramarital, and often serves as the lynchpin for a cautionary tale of woe. Carens (2010) explores the perennial appearances of English professors in college films as “dangerously seductive figure[s] associated with sexual transgression and other illicit temptations” (p. 1). He suggests that the cinematic male English instructor is presented as possessing a sort of secret knowledge of the ways of the world and the life of the mind – poetic, metaphysical, or spiritual fruits that are irresistible to young coeds. This dramatic central conceit also conveniently provides filmmakers and screenwriters with a number of opportunities for dramatic conflict – between instructor and student, society and the ‘mismatched’ couple, professor and administration, professor and spouse, etc. For some filmmakers, like famous film director Woody Allen, the use of the theme may reflect personal attitudes toward both sex and academia (Yaffe, 2015). At any rate, implicit and explicit sexual or romantic contact between professors and students occurs in many college films of every decade (Umphlett, 1984; Hinton, 1994; Conklin, 2008).

While many depicted professors exhibit immoral or unethical behaviors, a handful of others exemplify the archetypal righteous hero. The most notable examples are also some of the most lucrative and successful motion picture franchises in U.S. film history, the *Da Vinci Code* and *Indiana Jones* franchises. In the majority of these films, Tom Hanks’ Professor Langdon and Harrison Ford’s Dr. Jones are honest, earnest, chivalrous, intelligent, hardworking, courageous, well-groomed, fashionably dressed, seemingly affluent, and generally above reproach. While these “good professors” appear to be in the minority, other like-minded sojourners join them on the higher path. On-screen

professors like Denzel Washington in *The Great Debaters* (2007) and Julia Roberts in *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) emerge as inspirational and self-sacrificing characters whose flaws are easily forgiven – as they are often the result of social injustices or outdated conventions, and like Robin Williams in *Good Will Hunting* (1997), their few personal indiscretions are justified in the name of social progress or a mentoring relationship with their students. In *A Serious Man* (2009), Larry Gopnick presents a sympathetic character – one who is reluctant to break “the rules” and only does so under existential duress. Similarly, *A Single Man* (2009), based in 1960’s Los Angeles, offers a sympathetic depiction of an English professor who is mourning the untimely death of his lover. These cinematic college professors provide audiences with protagonists who do not inordinately suffer from mental illness, substance abuse, professional ineptitude, infidelity, murderous intent, or criminal mischief, but who strive for ethical and moral behavior in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Despite the published literature and mass media portrayals, there is no evidence that college professors are more prone to addiction, substance abuse, or ethical transgressions than other white-collar professionals. The etiology of the enduring “bad professor” stereotype is unclear, but its perennial resurgence may be related to the tendency of mainstream society to see college professors as “others.” In myth, literature, popular media, and folklore, the life of the mind is often associated with the hermitage, danger, witchcraft, the occult, the priesthood, mental illness, and hubristic human folly (Reynolds, 2014). It’s a life that lies outside of “normal” society and hovers uncomfortably above the white- and blue-collar divide (Flynn, 2014). In short, many of the cinematic depictions are often unkind to academicians, and some think they are

getting worse. However, the assertion that such characterizations are worsening in frequency and severity is not convincingly supported in much of the existing literature. Many studies do not consider the influence of several factors: the type of film, the motion picture marketplace, the viewing habits of audiences, the evolution of narrative techniques and tropes, or changes to the academic marketplace. This project considers the influence of such factors over time, and examines the type of negativity associated with professor depictions.

### **Research Questions**

This paper endeavors to investigate how formal cinematic techniques combine with narrative events to create negative depictions of college professors in American films, and to determine how these depictions may have changed since 1970. Conklin, Hinton, and Umphlett offer many observations on the filmic professor, but to date, no one has published a formally inspired analysis of college professor films. The following research questions will guide this analysis.

1. How have cinematic presentations of the college professor as a lead character changed since 1970?
2. Are recent filmic depictions of college professors in leading roles generally more negative than older depictions?
3. How do presentations of college professors in independent films differ from those of major studio releases? Why might there be a difference?

### **Formalism and Formal Analysis**

Formalist film theory focuses on the integration of formal filmic elements to elicit a certain response from the viewer (Eisenstein, Braudy, & Cohen, 2004; Bazin, 2004). At

its core, the formalist approach recognizes that a film's premise and general plot does not account for the totality of the cinematic viewing experience or the entirety of a character's portrayal. Depictions of characters are achieved through the confluence of several dramatic and cinematic techniques, including the body movement, diction, dialect, vocal tone and tenor, makeup, hairstyle, wardrobe, and facial expressions of the actor, the lighting of the scene, the spatial composition of the camera shot, the arrangement of objects in the shot (*mise en scene*), photographic focal length and depth of field, music, editing, sound design, and color palette of the scene and the scenic elements (props, set dressing, sets, costumes, background actors). At times, these various technical aspects are intentionally exaggerated in order to evoke the internal experiences of the character – this expressionist approach has been used in some American films since the 1920's.

Thus, a negative depiction is not just about what the character does and what happens to them in the course of the narrative, it's constructed through an interplay of several different production elements. For example, a character lit with a bright light from below will take on a sinister look, despite their facial expression or dialogue. Colors contribute to the emotional apprehension of character as well (Gombrich, 1977; Riley, 1995): red is associated with sex, violence, and passion, while navy blue evokes authority and respectability. The pace of the film's editing can elicit a certain response: quick film edits both convey and elicit tension (Dancyger, 2014). Music sets the emotional tone of individual scenes, characters, and the entire film (Neumeyer (Ed.), 2013), as does sound design (Sonnenschein, 2001). Wardrobe provides the audience with significant clues as to a character's personality, social class, demeanor and profession (Crane, 2012; Street,

2001). Lighting contributes to the emotional tone of a scene and can express internal states of characters (Grodal, 2005), and cinematography (Brown, 2013) can express a mood for an individual character, a group, or setting. Filmmakers and performers also manipulate a character's dialect (Hodson, 2014; Lippi-Green, 1997), and details of their wardrobe (Street, 2001; Crane, 2012) in order to communicate with the audience. Hence, the filmic narrative and character portrayals are shaped through a number of techniques, and the analysis of a film should consider them, alongside theme and plot.

### **Sample Selection and Methodology**

Rather than surveying all American films set on college campuses, many of which downplay the role of the professor, I surveyed a sample of films from 1970-2016 that feature a college professor as one of the leading characters. I selected this time period for three reasons. First, for many cultural observers, the free concert at the Altamont Speedway in northern California on December 6, 1969 marked the end of the cultural revolution of the 1960's and the social change and optimism that characterized the latter part of the decade (Hotchner, 1990; Brody, 2015). The late 1960's and early 1970's was a defining time for the youth movement. The 1970's saw the nation's most divisive and controversial social issues played out by young people on college campuses, spurred in part by the Kent State shootings of May 4, 1970. As Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) buildings were burned and bombed on campuses across the country, many college professors participated in student protests against U.S. military action in Southeast Asia and against university administration's response to the attendant on-campus strikes, marches, and sit-ins (Heineman, 1992).

Second, the American system of higher education has changed significantly since

the first wave of baby boomers stormed the gates of the ivory tower in the early 1960's and transformed campus environments across the country. By 1970, enrollment at colleges and universities had grown dramatically, along with physical facilities (Thelin, 2011). The student population became larger and more diverse as admittance requirements eased. Since then, an exponential rise in enrollments, tuitions, student fees, administrator salaries, spending on athletics and student services have been accompanied by declining state support for state universities. These factors, coupled with a corresponding rise in anti-intellectual sentiment in the U.S., may have influenced the way filmmakers and moviegoers conceive of higher education and their place within the institution.

Third, the American motion picture industry has also undergone seismic changes since the late 1960's. The collapse of the Hollywood studio system, changes to censorship of content, the rise of countercultural and independent films, and the continuing battle against television radically changed the way films are made and marketed in the U.S. (Wexman, 2009). Moreover, as the types of films produced by both major studios and independents are indicated by a combination of market forces, economic trends, industry personnel, and audience preferences, an understanding of the context in which the sample films were produced is essential. Grouping films by decade is a common approach for some film scholars and historians (Block & Wilson, 2010; Thompson & Bordwell, 2009; Cook, 2002; Monaco, 2003; Lev, 2006) and researchers who have focused specifically on higher education films (Kirby, 2014; Oliker, 1993; Umphlett, 1984; Schwartz, 1963; Hinton, 1994). Using decades to assess historical trends is a convenient and accessible periodization technique that's been regularly used by

historians and educators (Borstelmann, 2011; Frum, 2000; Rossinow, 2016). In this case, such a temporal schema provides a systematic method for comparing characteristics of various filmic texts over fifty years that share a common character – the college professor.

In order to obtain a suitable and manageable sample of “professor films” for each decade, I conducted a search of the *IMDB* (Internet Movie Database) website and the college filmographies contained in the Umphlett, Conklin, and Hinton books, as well as some *Google* and *Google Scholar* searches using relevant keywords: professor, college professor, film, movies, cinema, university, college, character. Films that featured a professor character as a supporting or minor character were excluded from the sample. I then narrowed that list to only include college professor films released between 1970 and 2016. I placed those films into their respective decade and ascertained their financial success by locating their gross lifetime earnings in unadjusted dollars using the *IMDB* (*Internet Movie Database*), *Box Office Mojo* websites and box office data from back issues of *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

In order to quantify the films’ critical reception, I used the numeric rating from two websites that aggregate critical reviews from a number of publications and assign a total critic score, *Rotten Tomatoes.com* and *Metacritic.com*. I summed the two overall scores from these two sites for an average critical score. Unfortunately, several of the films from the 1970’s have not been scored by either site, so I had to find published reviews on those titles in order to determine their critical reception myself. Those with the highest number of critical reviews were placed at the top of my list. All of the sample films thus had a quantitative indication of both popular and critical success: dollars



earned and critical score. I then sorted and ranked films from each decade according to highest earnings and highest critical score in order to produce two lists of films: one for critically successful films by decade and one for financially successful films by decade. One can safely assume that the more commercially successful and critically acclaimed a film is, the more likely that relatively large numbers of American moviegoers have seen it – especially when compared with other less notable titles.

I then alternately selected the top films in each category (popular and critical) for each decade until a sample size of 5 films per decade was reached, for a total of 25 films. This resulted in a sample that includes 15% of all college professor films released between 1970-2016, including both high-budget “blockbusters” and independent “art house films” (see Appendix A and B). There appears to be a correlation between movies that are critically acclaimed through aggregators such as Rotten Tomatoes and box office successes, and that might account for some of the overlap between the two categories (Lundegaard, 2008). A larger sample size may have resulted in more extensive findings, but the current size was limited by the amount of time required to do a formal analysis of each film, as well as the space required for adequate discussion. Ultimately, the selection of this sample endeavors to represent the college professor films that most American moviegoers and critics have likely viewed, heard about, or talked about from a given decade (Table 1).

Like many Hollywood films, some of these films are biopics and others are adaptations of popular and commercially successful books or new installations in an existing franchise. In any case, audience members may have been familiar with some of the titles, stories, and concepts represented in these films and that may account for their

popularity and financial success. For the current sample, three films are from the Indiana Jones franchise and two are from the DaVinci Code series. While there are overlapping themes, characters, and other content in these serial productions, there is variation in the depictions of the professor characters and the plots, the formal style of each individual film, and the treatment of the university setting. These variations may be linked to the date of production and release, and a consideration and comparison of the films' contemporaneously defined characteristics is a valuable addition to the current research project, as it seeks to document changes in portrayals over time. At any rate, inclusion of more than one film from an ongoing franchise in the sample depends upon fidelity to the sample selection criteria alone. These criteria aim to identify films that a number of viewers have seen and a number of critics have lauded. They are not intended to "filter out" any films, even the recurrent high concept properties such as the Indiana Jones films.

From this sample, I conducted an analysis of the 25 films focused on how the filmmakers used various formal cinematic tools (like lighting, cinematography, set design, makeup, wardrobe, shot composition, camera movement, music, sound design, performance, dialogue, etc.) to present the leading or lead-supporting college professor character. These criteria were considered alongside plot or story elements to assess the degree to which the college professor character is depicted negatively in each film, and for all of the sample films of each decade. My focus was on the professor character while they're doing academic work (teaching, studying, researching, speaking with students or colleagues) or interacting with their partners, families, friends, and lovers within domestic and personal settings. The detailed analysis does not extend to the professor character while they are engaged in other pursuits (such as the *Indiana Jones* character

while he's on an adventure, the *Arrival* character while she's on the alien spaceship, or the *Nutty Professor* alter-ego character when he's running amok). The analysis also seeks to investigate cinematic college professors in settings that would be visible to relevant stakeholders in real-life academic situations, such as students, fellow faculty, administrators, alumni, or parents.

The analysis process begins with a viewing of the entire film, followed by repeated viewings of various scenes and sequences that are relevant to the professor character's work and home life. During these iterative viewings, notes are taken on various formal aspects unique to the production: cinematography, actor performance, music, sound design, editing, set design, wardrobe, mise en scene, etc. Detailed notes are also made on specific passages of dialogue that relate to the professor character's academic work and social behavior, with a particular focus on any negative aspects or transgressive elements of the presentation. These notes are then used to guide the comparison of professor character representations across the five decades and within each decade. Formal aspects of these representations are considered alongside narrative events to ascertain how the moral and ethical characteristics of the leading professor character are constructed for the viewer.

The extent to which a character is presented as negative depends upon various aspects of their physical and aural presentation, as well as their words and deeds throughout the film. Similarly, the visual and musical "background" against which their actions are set determine the negativity of their presentation. Finally, the analysis considers the historical and social contexts of the production. This is necessary, as feature films of all sizes are not only creative and artistic works, but also commercial

entertainment products designed to appeal to large audiences. Thus, mass market and financial interests will exert a demonstrable effect on content. Economic and social factors influence audiences and have a clear effect on the types of film being produced and distributed at any one time. Film studios often respond to the technology, tastes, and demographics of the ever-changing viewership in the marketplace by producing different types of content in an effort to maximize profits. These factors not only influence the types of films being made, but also the particular treatments of these characters within individual films. Other historical factors such as production, distribution, and viewing technology (which are continually in flux) may also affect the types of offerings from the major studios.

### **The Film Industry in the 1970's**

After several years of decline in movie attendance, the American film industry of the early 1970's was positioned for a modest comeback – one that would be fueled largely by members of the *Baby Boomer Generation*. These children of the World War II/Great Depression generation belonged to a renowned demographic that was recognized for its massive size, unique sense of cohort among individual members, and attention received from marketers bent on selling products to a young, relatively affluent audience hungry for something new (Block, 2010). By 1973, Hollywood film studios that had been crippled by the popularity of television since the 1950's struggled to survive an economic recession that brought an end to post-World War II prosperity. High national unemployment and inflation, studio mergers and acquisitions, drastic changes to management, anxiety and activism around the Vietnam War, and flagging audience enthusiasm for movies nearly destroyed the old “studio system” and Hollywood

executives responded by developing fare that was attractive to young viewers (Wexman, 2009). Thanks to a new tax code sponsored by U.S. President Richard Nixon and the innovative cinematic work of young *boomer* directors such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, William Friedkin, and Francis Ford Coppola, studios were not only able to finance a slew of productions in the early part of the decade, they were also able to capture boomer-filled audiences with more daring and controversial content. American youths seemed to want films that contained more adult content than they could see at home on television, and in the 1970's the Hollywood studios explicitly targeted this audience with films that featured more violent, sexualized, realistic, and socially progressive content than it had ever produced in the past. From the late 1960's through the early 1970's, controversial counter-cultural productions like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Harold and Maude* (1971), and *Zabriskie Point* (1970) were made by boomers for boomers – at times with the full support of traditionally conservative major studios (Block, 2010).

While this “young people making films for young people” model began to attract more boomers to the movies, the industry would continue to struggle until the mid-1970's and the emergence of the so-called *modern blockbuster*. *Jaws* (1975), directed by a young film school graduate, Steven Spielberg, became the model for a new kind of product – one that coupled a very aggressive marketing and merchandising strategy with a widespread national theatrical release. While many films of the early 1970's challenged the status quo with edgy stories and unconventional filmmaking by inexperienced filmmakers, most of the late 1970's blockbusters were *four quadrant movies* that appealed to general audiences of various demographics. *Star Wars* (1977), *Rocky* (1976),

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Grease* (1978), *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), *Superman* (1978), and other high profile, high concept films generated massive revenues for the industry by targeting both young and old moviegoers. Although production costs grew rapidly during this time, these new blockbusters attracted substantial corporate investment and gained international appeal (Wexman, 2009). As a result, massive blockbuster profits contributed to a major recovery for the industry. By the end of the decade, Hollywood studio films were once again very powerful, attracting large and diverse audiences.

### **The 1970's Sample and Analysis**

The decade between 1970 and 1980 was a tumultuous time for the United States, and higher education was not immune to the cultural and social upheaval. The college professor films of the decade are no less turbulent, featuring faculty who exhibit a number of negative behaviors. They are mentally ill (*The End of the Road*, 1970), drinking and drugging (*Lost and Found*, 1979; *Straw Dogs*, 1971; *The End of the Road*, 1970), sexually active with students (*How Do I Love Thee?*, 1970; *Manhattan*, 1979; *R.P.M.*, 1970), obsessed with sex (*The Harrad Experiment*, 1973), disillusioned with teaching (*Adam at Six A.M.*, 1970), combative (*Getting Straight*, 1970), corrupt (*The Gambler*, 1974), arrogant and abusive (*The Paper Chase*, 1973), and violent (*Straw Dogs*, 1971; *The Eiger Sanction*, 1975). The 1970's college professor sample contains films that have endured as audience and critic favorites over the years: *Straw Dogs* (1971), *The Paper Chase* (1973), *The Gambler* (1974), *The Eiger Sanction* (1975), and *Manhattan* (1979). *Straw Dogs*, *The Gambler*, and *The Eiger Sanction* are explicit in their depictions of violence and risky behavior, and all three depict college professors

who lead “double lives.”

In *Straw Dogs*, David Summer (Dustin Hoffman), an erstwhile pacifist and math professor, abandons his affable American tourist persona and embraces his inner killer in order to defend his wife and their country cottage from a vigilante gang. Alongside the brutal violence of the prolonged finale, a number of formal aspects reflect the professor’s transformation. At the start of the film, the youthful David is casual, wearing light brown and white, gold colored wire-rimmed glasses, and slightly long hair, making him a fairly fashionable figure compared to most of the English villagers, who seem distrustful of the smiling foreigner, his convertible sports car, and Northeastern U.S. seaboard accent. However, when vigilantes attack the farmhouse, David’s wool sweaters and tweed jackets are replaced with a dark suit coat, dark slacks, yellow dress shirt and tie. As the fight escalates, David loses his suit coat and tie, his shirt is covered and blood and grime, his glasses are first cracked, broken, and then lost. Drenched in dirt, sweat, and blood, he looks far more like one of his murderous attackers than an unassuming academic and peacenik. The lighting is similarly dramatic in the climax. Throughout the film, David is sympathetically illuminated, even at night. But during the battle, he uses the pitch darkness of the cottage to defend the surprise attacks – the darkness is clearly now his greatest ally. Throughout most of the film, the portrayal of David is marked by Hoffman’s passivity, politeness and affability, and he seems uncomfortable in many of the exchanges with the villagers. Yet, after all of his enemies are vanquished, he appears to be strangely relaxed and winsome, smiling as he drives through the darkness toward the village, covered in grime and sweat.

Similarly, Clint Eastwood’s seemingly well-mannered art professor, Jonathan

Hemlock (*The Eiger Sanction*, 1975) conceals a dangerous alter ego – an internationally renowned professional assassin. When we first see Dr. Hemlock, he’s presented as a fashionable, 40-something instructor who seems very comfortable in the classroom of a sunny, southern California college. But, very quickly, audiences see a seedier side as he slaps one of his students on the bottom and tells her not to study “it” all off. Minutes later, he roughs up a shady character in his office who is connected to his assassination background. The classroom and university buildings are all realistically lit in industrial fluorescent yellow and green. In contrast, Hemlock’s home is dark, wood paneled, and rustic. Wide windows look out into a verdant and sunny California setting, but the brownish inside is composed of high contrast chiaroscuro, and lined in framed pictures, prints, fine art, and shelves of books – a romanticized, if murky, nod to the secluded life of the mind. This neo-noir look accompanies the adventurer/professor throughout the film, alternating with bright, naturally lit outdoor scenes. Similar to many film noir anti-heroes, Dr. Hemlock is portrayed as an athletic, intelligent, macho, womanizing, selfish, racist, money-hungry adventurer. Yet, in the end, he spares his intended target – an old friend. He’s not quite Indiana Jones, but like the heroic anthropologist, he’s more comfortable in the fight than in the classroom.

In *The Gambler*, James Caan plays Axel Freed, a writing professor at a New York City university and compulsive gambler. Caan’s Freed hustles his way through the film, rushing from the dark and cozy lecture hall to underground casinos and seedy bars with a frenetic enthusiasm. Like Hemlock and Summer, Freed is a seemingly respectable college professor with an amoral and violent alter ego that unwinds as the film progresses. Surrounded by immanent violence from loan sharks and bookmakers, Freed



is inevitably plunged into literal darkness and in the last scene, we see him smiling nihilistically at his own bleeding face in the mirror of a black and red-trimmed brothel after having beaten up a knife-wielding pimp. Like Hoffman's Summer, Freed initially cuts a dashing, trendy, young figure who seems completely out of place in the classroom. He wears no ties or tweed. His thin, handsome face is framed by long sideburns and a sizable "fro," and he struts around the city in tight slacks and shirts open at the chest. His confidence eventually dissipates and is replaced with desperation as his gambling debts mount, and he seemingly reaches a low point when his mother tells him he has the "morals of an earthworm." But, he does sink deeper, and by the time he stumbles down the deep red stairs of the makeshift brothel and toward the mirror, he has become more than an anti-hero. He's surpassed both David Summer and Jonathan Hemlock, and is one of the most transgressive college professor characters in film history.

At first glance, *Manhattan* and *The Paper Chase* stand in stark contrast with the three other films. Yet, the elite, Ivy-League settings barely obscure an undercurrent of cruelty, arrogance, and dishonesty. Philandering adulterer and Columbia University English professor Yale (conspicuously named), played by Michael Murphy in Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979), favors stereotypical East Coast professorial garb - corduroy suit jackets, collared button-down shirts, and flannel slacks. Like Freed and David, he's trendy and attractive, but his gait, movement, language, and dialect lend a stereotypically professorial tone to the performance. Like Axel Freed, he's a fast talker with a great repartee and impressive vocabulary, but unlike the smooth, strutting gambler, Yale slouches slightly, gazing at his feet as he ambles down the street. As he cheats on his unsuspecting wife with his best friend's (Woody Allen as Isaac) ex-girlfriend, Mary

(Diane Keaton), the lighting reflects his morally questionable behavior. He's continually fading in and out of the inky blackness of director of photography Gordon Willis' high-contrast black and white exposures. In many of the interactions with Isaac, his face is obscured by the camera angle. He's the only character in the film that is occasionally shot from the back for long portions of a scene, and at times he is captured in a long shot, appearing far away and small in the frame. In a scene where he has snuck away from his wife to be with Mary, he's silhouetted in her coal-black apartment for nearly the entire scene. For a character ostensibly interested in intellectual pursuits, he's quite vain, selfish, and materialistic. In one scene, Isaac scolds him for his affection for his flashy convertibles - a Porsche 356 and Ford Mustang. At the end of the film, Isaac confronts him about his betrayal and the secret affair with Mary. Yale replies, "Don't turn this into one of your big moral issues," and moments later he petulantly argues that he's "not a saint." Finally, he leaves his wife, abandoning his friendship with Isaac.

Like *Manhattan's* Yale, *The Paper Chase* presents a professor character that exemplifies the archetypal east coast elite intellectual. John Houseman's Professor Kingsfield lords over his law classroom, speaking with precision in a Mid-Atlantic, blue-blooded, Boston-tinged accent. His three-piece gray suits, silk pocket square, red bowtie, leather briefcase, and dark overcoat give him an imperial bearing. His stern affect becomes arrogant when we see the interior of his massive, wood-paneled and expensively adorned house and his classically dressed Ivy League office. Most of the editing, cinematography and shot composition are in the traditional Hollywood style, and the Baroque-inspired music score contributes to the elite and formal nature of Kingsfield and Harvard University. While *Manhattan's* Yale is an energetic and urbane academic on the

rise, Houseman's Kingsfield has clearly arrived, and his effete and emotionally distant performance encapsulates the disdain that one would expect from the stereotypical aging, tenured Ivy-League and wealthy Boston Brahmin and famous lawyer who offers "the most expensive legal advice in the country." He's balding, grey, overweight, elderly, and occupies expensive settings. He regularly regales his students with stone-faced passivity, gazing down his nose at them from his lectern. Throughout the film, Kingsfield maintains an emotionally abusive and manipulative relationship with the film's leading character – law student James Hart (Timothy Bottoms), as well as a very strained one with his daughter Susan Fields (Lindsay Wagner). Overall, the professor characters in this decade's sample films are "externally" negative – their physical violence, unethical and anti-social behavior, cruelty, and addictions cause harm to others – and they rarely suffer any consequences.

### **The Film Industry in the 1980's**

Like the late 1970's, the success of major motion pictures in the 1980's depended in large part on the attendance of the baby boomers, many of whom were increasingly watching movies at home, via cable TV or videocassette. By 1990, use of the VCR (videocassette recorder) in American homes increased to 67 percent, an exponential rise from the reported 1 percent in 1980 (Block, 2010). Rather than challenging Hollywood's bottom line, as television home-based viewing did in the 1950's, the VCR provided an additional revenue source for studios and a new way for the film-loving boomers to consume its products. Prior to 1980, viewers who wanted to re-watch movies had to either pay full ticket price at the theatre or wait for a year to watch it on network television, where the films were heavily edited for commercial breaks and content

deemed too adult for broadcasting audiences. Home viewing with the viewer firmly in control of the experience was normalized in the 1980's, changing the relationship between the viewer and the product, as well as increasing earning and marketing opportunities for producers and video distributors alike.

The film industry still faced challenges, however. Cable television and paid movie services like HBO and Cinemax offered unedited premium Hollywood films for home viewing, in addition to original programming like live sporting events. In the early part of the decade, audience enthusiasm for new motion picture releases was somewhat curbed by a dismal economy exacerbated by an oil crisis and the Iran hostage situation (Block, 2010). The industry responded to these threats by producing more franchises (sequels of popular films that often feature the same characters) of successful blockbusters that were aggressively marketed to domestic and international audiences through massive advertising campaigns. Production and release costs increased, due in large part to expensive advertising campaigns and special effects. However, the new blockbuster release model and expanded theater construction made the decade one of the most profitable on record. Many blockbusters and their franchises were now making massive profits during their opening weekend domestically, which provided additional momentum to lucrative international runs. This new strategy – fewer movies making more money – resulted in content that depended on simple stories rendered with increasingly realistic digital special effects. Special merchandising products were created from licensing opportunities with other corporate entities, resulting in franchise-themed apparel, soft drinks, and fast food products. As enormous marketing, merchandising, and advertising efforts drew more general audiences to blockbusters, the content and themes of major

studio films became more accessible and far less controversial than in the previous decade (Wexman, 2009). Studios were reluctant to risk spending blockbuster-sized budgets on projects that may alienate mainstream viewers, and experimental and alternative cinematic voices faded as a result.

### **The 1980's Sample and Analysis**

After the stunning success of *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, studios began to favor large productions over smaller, niche films. The financial triumph of films like *The Return of the Jedi* (1983), *E.T.* (1982), and *Top Gun* (1981) lent momentum to a new practice – the nationwide simultaneous summer release of blockbusters. While many early 1970's films targeted young adult *baby boomers* interested in social and political issues, the 1980's produced escapist and family-friendly adventure and comedy titles designed to perform well among many different demographics. This shift in narrative theme and dramatic tone can be seen in many 1980's college professor films. Some college professor character depictions were negative: sex with students (*A Change of Seasons*, 1980; *Clue*, 1985; *D.O.A.*, 1988), paranoia (*Arlington Road*, 1989), excessive alcohol consumption (*D.O.A.*, 1988), adultery (*A Change of Seasons*, 1980), and murder (*Night School*, 1981; *Clue*, 1985). Yet, several 1980's professor character portrayals are quite positive in nature. *Sweet Liberty* (1986), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Lianna* (1983), *Desert Hearts* (1985), *Animal Behavior* (1989), and the *Indiana Jones* franchise (1981, 1984, 1989) present professors who are beset by difficult circumstances, but persevere in a traditionally heroic manner (Campbell, 1949).

The 1980's college professor film sample includes three blockbusters, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Ghostbusters* (1984), and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*

(1989), and two critical hits, *Lianna* (1983) and *Desert Hearts* (1985). The two Indiana Jones films present anthropology professor Dr. Indiana Henry Jones and his alter ego adventurer, Indiana Jones (Indy) in a highly stylized manner in the new blockbuster tradition. The film's production values reflect the high budget – dolly moves, crane shots, intricate stunts, and sweeping shots featuring dozens of extras and exotic imagery fill the screen as “Indy” saves his friends, lover, and civilization. Both in the classroom and in the field, Jones is presented as admirable, handsome, athletic, and upstanding. At the university, his classroom resembles a traditional English lecture hall, complete with varnished wood features and antique windows. Likewise, the treatment of both the university and Indy's house is very romantic and sentimental – old globes, sketches of skeletons, rows of maps and books are presented in warm brown and yellow tones, and the school hallways are as dark and elegant as a Dutch master painting. The reverence for classical university education is on full display.

In both *Raiders* and *Last Crusade*, Ford's Indiana Jones embodies many of the conventions of the traditional American hero. He speaks confidently with a Midwestern American accent, stands tall and moves acrobatically, yet bumbles and mumbles at times with the “aw shucks” self-effacing sincerity of the boy next door. He's clean-shaven and well dressed in the civilian world, but unshaven, sweaty and dirty when he's adventuring. Although he confidently wields a bullwhip and a pistol in the field, he moves nervously when at the red-bricked, tree-lined university, struggling to carry a large brown leather satchel, briefcase, and an armful of rolled maps, and asking “What am I? In trouble?” when he meets with the Dean. We rarely see him drink, and the one time that he intoxicated, he mourning the apparent death of Marion, his once and future romantic

interest. The sexual relationship between Indy and Marion in the first film is sub textual, but in the second one, Indy and his father joke uncomfortably about having unknowingly slept with the same woman – a double-crossing Nazi femme fatale.

Reflecting the accessible nature of the blockbuster, the editing in both films resembles the *classical Hollywood style* in that it does not call attention to itself and focuses on covering the scene seamlessly without challenging the viewer to think about the film as a cinematic construction. Similarly, the lighting throughout balances practical realism with a traditional expressive style, alternating between low-key yellows and reds and bright, outdoor natural illumination. As such, Indy is always lit flatteringly - like a hero and a movie star. Yet, in the second film, which was released eight years after the first, the lighting at the university is considerably darker, making frequent use of high contrast *chiaroscuro*. Here, Indy's university office is cramped and claustrophobic, and the lines of students waiting to see him outside his door reflect the unease he now feels at school. Moreover, the carefully crafted orchestral music score in both films paints a sympathetic and romantic portrait of the hero and his journeys. However, it must be noted that Dr. Jones' alter-ego, Indy, is at times sexually aggressive and callous in his interactions with women, especially deep into the second act of the first two films. The contrast between these three personas - the unassuming college professor, the heroic, self-sacrificial adventure hero, and the roguish cad – is unsettling, especially as the audience is encouraged to see the character as a righteous figure. However, as will be discussed later, depictions of the Jones character have changed considerably over time, and the most recent cinematic incarnation (2008) paints him as a figure who is trying to make amends for his past transgressions.

If Indiana Jones is to be the all-American hero, then *Ghostbusters*' Dr. Peter Venkman (Bill Murray) is the mischievous anti-hero so often observed in *screwball comedies* (Gehring, 1986). The young Columbia University professor with a degree in parapsychology is consistently sarcastic and disrespectful of authority. Early on, we see him drinking whiskey straight out of the bottle while lounging on the green, leafy, urban campus, and attempting to seduce a much younger student in one of the opening scenes. He's balding and often unshaven, and even when he dons a full navy suit, he appears slightly disheveled, standing in stark contrast to Indiana Jones' well-coiffed, sharply attired professor. Like the Indiana Jones films, the formal aspects conform to traditional Hollywood blockbuster treatments. The orchestral score makes use of traditional instrumentation, punctuating the comedic and dramatic turns of the plot while sympathizing with the plight of the leading characters. The sound design and lighting are primarily realistic and the editing is completely "invisible." At the end, Professor Venkman has been transformed from a smarmy, desk-bound con man into an Indy-like adventurer - covered in dirt, sweat, and slime, wearing a uniform that resembles janitor overalls, and kissing Dana (played by Sigourney Weaver) as triumphant music and cheering crowds play in the background. The anti-heroic comedic character is now the hero, saving Manhattan from a malevolent otherworldly villain, winning the arm of the female lead character, and gaining the admiration of the community.

Two of the first American films to positively depict lesbian couples, the critically acclaimed *Desert Hearts* (1985) and *Lianna* (1983) also share an independent film pedigree that is reflected in the low budget production, socially progressive content, and controversial subject matter. In *Desert Hearts*, Helen Shaver plays Vivian Bell, a



Columbia University English professor who travels to Nevada in 1959 to obtain a divorce from her husband. Once there, the prim, well-mannered, traditionally fashionable, and well-spoken Vivian begins a romantic relationship with a younger, more adventurous woman, Cay Rivvers (Patricia Charbonneau). Vivian's character represents a slightly snobby east-coast academic who's out of place in the rough-hewn Nevada desert. She speaks deliberately, choosing her words carefully and delivering them in a slight Mid-Atlantic patrician accent. While Cay likes to listen to 1950's country and rock and roll, Vivian recognizes a Prokofiev suite after hearing just a few bars. Vivian is attractive, sharp-witted, and often presented in subtle, flattering chiaroscuro lighting. In her temporary home office, simple wood paneling, red drapes, a coffee cup, and open books surround her, soft outdoor light leaks through diaphanous curtains as she reads, writes, and lights a cigarette. It is a romantic rendering of the bespectacled professor at work. The work is short-lived, however, as Cay successfully encourages her to have more fun. At the start of the film, her body movement and gestures are tense and defensive, but as she and Cay begin to fall in love, she seems more relaxed and confident, literally letting her hair down. By the end of the film, Vivian is softer and more vulnerable, heroically embracing the socially precarious new relationship as she journeys back east.

While *Desert Hearts'* professor is clearly a heroic figure, *Lianna's* is more ambiguous. Ruth, played by Jane Hallaren, is a professor of child psychology who meets Lianna (Linda Griffiths) when she's a student in one of her undergraduate courses. Although she facilitates the Lianna's entrance into her new sexual identity and comforts her during her split from her college professor husband, Ruth eventually breaks her heart. Legendary independent director John Sayles directs the film, and as such, the

cinematography, set design, and lighting is low budget and very naturalistic. Ruth and her house are rendered in warm, comfortable tones, and the first sex scene with her and Lianna is dark and intimate, featuring experimental sound design elements. While Ruth is attractive, intelligent, and soft-spoken, Dick (Lianna's husband) is cruel, abusive, violent, and unfaithful. His classroom attire – brown corduroy jacket, wool tie, striped shirt – strikes a balance between 1980's fashion and stereotypical professor attire. The home he shares with Lianna is adorned in red and oaken hues. It's a pleasant, middle-class home, but the red walls downstairs may hint of Dick's violent nature and Lianna's suppressed passion. Otherwise, the film is realistically and practically lit, edited, and scored. The depictions of both professor characters are negative -- both are selfish and self-absorbed, both are unfaithful, and both sleep with their students.

In general, the depictions in this decade are more pro-social and optimistic than those in the 1970's sample. With the exception of Lianna, most of these films offer professor protagonists who are relatively free of external negativity and show few signs of "internal" negativity such as depression or anger. While there are some scenes that depict them as opportunistic, portrayals in this decade sample are primarily heroic.

### **The Film Industry in the 1990's**

Both the costs and influence of the studio blockbusters continued to increase in the 1990's, while their theatrical life cycle shortened considerably. A new blockbuster would hit the theaters and be gone within a few weeks, quickly packed off to VHS and cable TV where lucrative post-theater domestic and international revenues waited (Block, 2010). Simultaneously, American theaters were expanding and being integrated into entertainment and shopping centers in order to capitalize on foot traffic, cross-

merchandising opportunities and impulse purchases. Multiplexes offered more screens than ever before, and were uniquely suited to handle the massive crowds that flocked to high concept features like *Independence Day* (1996), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Titanic* (1997). Short theatrical runs and large marketing campaigns combined to make each blockbuster release a big event and a temporary opportunity – audiences had to rush to catch the show on the big screen, and once there, they paid premium ticket prices.

Correspondingly exponential increases in home viewing of major motion pictures through VCR's and paid cable TV services brought more piracy, especially in international markets. By the late 1990's, the distribution of unauthorized VHS and DVD copies of American films – especially blockbusters – began to significantly affect the earnings of the major studios. This was detrimental to an industry that was both paying more for star performers and depending heavily on international revenues to produce more blockbusters. Many production studios and entertainment companies responded by consolidating and diversifying – large companies merged with international and non-entertainment interests and increasingly relied on international investments. Despite the challenges, revenues, ticket prices, and theatrical attendance continued to grow throughout the decade. Large audiences were lured by new special effects made possible by innovations in digital and computer technology, and animated films for children and adults grew even more popular (Wexman, 2009). Video games rose in popularity as well, but one of the most significant developments to arise from the “digital technological revolution” was the resurgence of American independent cinema.

The *new American cinema* movement of the late 1960's and 1970's had faded

with the emergence of the blockbuster, and independent cinema in the U.S. had begun to fade by the late 1980's. However, the 90's brought new, inexpensive digital technology that made filmmaking relatively affordable to a new generation of young filmmakers. While recent film school grads like Steven Soderbergh and Spike Lee reflected the interests of young viewers weary of the mainstream blockbuster fare promoted by the major studios, adventurous distribution and production companies like Miramax Films began to bring independent films to theaters, DVD, and cable. Spurred by the popularity of the Sundance Film Festival, and the new word-of-mouth capabilities of the World Wide Web, alternative and independent filmmakers brought fresh perspectives, innovative techniques, minority voices, and daring content to young audiences once again. By the close of the decade, unique films like *sex, lies and videotape* (1989), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), and *Barton Fink* (1991) had enriched and expanded the film industry, and major distributors were offering alternative fare alongside the larger blockbusters. Smaller productions featuring performances and content geared for more mature, discerning audiences found success with audiences, and by 2000, had become part of the major studio's production and distribution strategy (Block, 2010).

### **The 1990's Sample and Analysis**

The 1990's produced fewer college professor films than the 1980's, yet more than the 1970's. Some of the 90's films feature leading characters who exhibit a variety of negative characteristics and behaviors: mental illness (*The Fisher King*, 1991), alcoholism (*One True Thing*, 1998), sex with a student (*Surviving Desire*, 1991; *Mind Games*, 1996), lying and cheating (*Quiz Show*, 1994), revenge killing (*Just Cause*, 1995),

and adultery (*Husbands and Wives*, 1992). Several others present positive portrayals: *Chain Reaction* (1996), *The Nutty Professor* (1996), *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996), *Flubber* (1997), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), and *Good Will Hunting* (1997).

The 1990's college professor film sample includes two financially successful (*The Nutty Professor* and *Good Will Hunting*) and three critically acclaimed films (*Husbands and Wives*, *Reversal of Fortune*, and *Quiz Show*). The Nutty Professor was a mainstream success, yet it did not achieve blockbuster status. In fact, the decade did not produce a single blockbuster college professor film. One notable production was *Good Will Hunting*, one of the most critically and financially successful middle budget dramas in history. *Hunting* exceeded all expectations, winning two Academy Awards and seven other Oscar nominations and earning more than \$225 million in its lifetime. The film features two prominent professor characters, but Robin Williams' Sean Maguire – a community college mental health counseling instructor and professional counselor – is the supporting lead

Professor Maguire is slightly rumpled around the edges, often wearing wrinkled and unassuming cardigan sweaters, button down shirts with rolled up sleeves, and corduroy pants, Sean's wardrobe and physical movement exemplify a middle-class and middle-aged bachelor who frequently works at a desk, in a classroom, or office. His color palette is eclectic and mismatched, and his longish hair and bushy beard belies a lack of concern for his own outward appearance. Although he still lives in the tough, working-class neighborhood of *Southie* (South Boston) in a run-down, two-story walk-up apartment, and drinks beer at the local pub and whiskey at home, his dialect and vocabulary separate him from his neighbors. He usually speaks with an almost perfect

Midwestern American accent, yet at times his speech belies a well-educated and well-traveled life. When he delivers a monologue to Will at the park, dressing down the young man for his arrogance and ignorance, Maguire's voice possesses a slightly patrician tone. It has an upper middle-class quality, free of any regional dialects, and it stands as a sharp contrast to Will's Southie twang. Maguire's manner is traditional and polite by middle-class standards; he stands when others enter the room, he shakes hands when greeting both friends and strangers. His demeanor reflects a level of gentility that stands in stark contrast to Will and his crew: he paints in watercolor, he appears to be comfortable among the white tablecloths of a fine restaurant, and his office is stacked high with books. His sparse and dingy apartment is stacked with dirty dishes, yet it radiates with a welcoming brown and yellow palette – as does his counseling office where he and Will do most of their work together. Throughout the film, the professor is portrayed positively as a nurturing mentor and de facto father figure to Will.

In some ways, *Hunting's* Sean Maguire resembles the professor character in *Reversal of Fortune*, a film that reenacts a true life high-profile attempted murder mystery and ensuing criminal trial. Ron Silver plays Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, who guides a team of graduate law students through the complicated trial, coaching and employing them along the way as they defend accused murderer Claus Von Bulow. Like Sean, he's unassuming and casual in appearance, sporting a large head of tousled hair and thick moustache. He often looks like he's going to a baseball game, rather than to class or court., favoring t-shirts, shorts, or blue jeans. His house looks comfortable and a little run down, and his home office is cluttered with papers and files. Both at home and in the office, tans, light blues and warm brown tones surround him.

The dialogue-heavy film features a sparse musical soundtrack, focusing on Silver's Northeastern dialect and his judicial acrobatics. The lighting, deep focus, and long depth of field are very traditional and realistic, showcasing the deftness with which the teacher/attorney manages his legal team. Like Williams' Sean Maguire, Dershowitz's portrayal is very positive – he's a warm, accommodating, approachable, intelligent, and successful instructor and mentor. However, this portrayal is inconsistent with one troubling question that underlies the story; did Dershowitz defend suspected murderer Von Bulow even though he suspected he was guilty? This places the depiction in a slightly ambiguous light, and in the final scene, the viewer is left wondering about the righteousness of Dershowitz's cause.

Based on a true story, Robert Redford's *Quiz Show* features a college professor character that stands in stark contrast to Maguire and Dershowitz. Ralph Fiennes plays Charles Van Doren, a well-groomed, effete professor of literature at Columbia University. Although the film is set in the more formal 1950's, Charles' patrician Mid-Atlantic accent, perfectly groomed hair, gold tie pin, dapper suits, and pressed shirts paint a picture of privilege and pride. The smooth and sweeping dolly moves, shallow and rack focus, low-key lighting and high contrast exposure treat the classically handsome Fiennes like a fashion model, and his wood paneled, book-filled, warmly lit office further romanticizes the status of his Ivy League post. His frequent references to classical literature and poetry, and formally polite demeanor provide a dramatic counterpoint to his cheating on the titular TV game show, and his lying to his family, friends, and students. By the end of the film, Professor Van Doren is humbled and publically shamed – he's painted as a spoiled, morally bankrupt elitist who deserves punishment.

In many ways, Eddie Murphy's Professor Sherman Klump (*The Nutty Professor*) is the polar opposite to Fiennes' Van Doren. Where Van Doren is thin, fit looking, classically attractive, articulate, and suave, Klump is extremely overweight, clumsy, socially awkward, shy, and kind. He's dressed in stereotypical teacher-nerd attire; brown suit, gold-rimmed round eyeglasses, bow tie, front pocket stuffed with pens and a metal ruler. Conversely, his chemically induced and testosterone infused alter ego, Buddy Love, is thin, fit, attractive, obnoxious, and ultimately, cruel and abusive. Klump's classroom and the university are also presented in a classical fashion - green, leafy, brick-lined exteriors and wood and marble trimmed *New Deal era* interiors - typical of so many college comedies. Like those films, this film spends a lot of time poking fun at pretentious and craven university administrators and donors and adheres to mainstream classical Hollywood style production values, i.e. realistic lighting and color palette, invisible editing, smooth camera moves, etc. In the end, Professor Klump returns to the kind, self-effacing, sympathetic hero he was in the beginning, winning the external grant, and the affections of the female lead (Jada Pinkett Smith as Carla Purty).

Woody Allen's comedy, *Husbands and Wives* is an experimental mix of traditional narrative sections and documentary style on camera interviews with the characters. Woody Allen plays Dr. Gabriel Roth, a writing professor at Columbia University who splits up with his wife after having an affair with one of his female students (Juliette Lewis and Rain). The naturalistic lighting and regular use of handheld camera foretell the emergence of the reality television style while recalling the freewheeling low-budget independent work of 1960's era John Cassavetes. There is very little music and no film score, and the sound design makes use of naturalistic field sound.



The editing and shot framing is unusual, making frequent use of middle length shots, two shots, voyeuristic camera angles and oblique compositions. This lends Allen's Gabe a frenetic dubiousness that underscores his risky relationship with Rain while casting doubt on the stability of his character. Moreover, Gabe's apartment is warmly lit with dense yellows and reds, red chairs, framed art on the walls and stacked tall with wooden bookshelves – it's an eclectic and cozy space that seemingly suggests Gabe's intellectual pursuits and the familiar comfort of his marriage. Ultimately, Gabe is completely alone, filled with self-doubt and self-hatred over the destructive affair. The final scene – and interview with the remorseful and lonely professor – is made even more pessimistic by an abrupt cut to black.

Overall, the professor characters in the 1990's sample display indications of internal negativity, such as grief over the loss of a spouse, problem drinking, neuroses, self-doubt, and emotional insecurity. Additionally, some of their external actions – deceiving the public for money, cheating on their spouse, seducing a student, lying to family - negatively affect their relationships with others and compromise their moral standing.

### **The Film Industry in the Early 2000's**

Like the 1990's, the early 2000's saw rising film production costs and a U.S. motion picture and distribution industry that created large blockbusters for both domestic and international audiences. However, the handful of multinational companies that dominated the creation and dissemination of American entertainment were now facing unprecedented marketing budgets. The cost to successfully promote the release of a major studio blockbuster *tent pole* film (a film with earnings so large that it will support a

number of other productions released by a studio) to a global audience was now becoming as large as an individual film's production costs, which could easily be as much as \$100 million. Additionally, salaries for star performers continued to increase, and performers regularly demanded large bonuses up front, rather than taking a share of the profits after the film's theatrical and home video releases. This further raised the risk for studios financing multi-million dollar blockbusters, with no guarantee of a return on investment. After all, a film could flop, leaving Hollywood insiders and investors with a massive financial loss. The studios compensated for this uncertainty by capitalizing on both the first weekend of a film's release and the post-theatrical domestic and international DVD sales. In some cases, the film's first weekend earnings would break even with the production, distribution, and marketing budget, and DVD sales would ensure a net profit within six months of a release (Block, 2010).

However, new challenges were presented by the ubiquity of the internet. By 2006, digital online piracy of major motion pictures had become a serious threat to DVD sales, and video on demand services were fast becoming a reality, which resulted in fewer people going to theaters or buying "hard copy" DVD's. For the first time since the rise of television in the 1950's, home viewing was posing a direct challenge to movies, and ticket prices began to rise. In 2007, Hollywood was at a breaking point, and dramatic pay disparity between movie stars, high profile directors, and screenwriters resulted in a costly strike by members of the Writers Guild of America. At the end of the decade, the studios has reduced their risk and boosted profits by financing fewer films directly and by distributing more projects from outside companies (Block, 2010). Additionally, production, distribution, and exhibition costs declined through digital technology. Most

productions were able to shoot with digital cameras, rather than expensive film stock, theaters projected films more quickly and cheaply with digital projectors, and computer generated images (CGI) allowed filmmakers to produce fantastic images without the cost of on-location special effects. Additionally, releasing content across a number of viewing platforms like theaters, television, streaming internet video, and DVD allowed film studios to maximize the exposure of their products to global audiences quickly and inexpensively. As a result, studios and distributors had the flexibility to produce and release a variety of types of films to a diverse audience (Wexman, 2009). As a result, blockbuster franchises and sequels (especially superhero films) began to dominate the theaters, while smaller and independent films appeared more frequently online, on cable, and on DVD. Variety of content and viewing platforms combined to meet the appetites of diverse international audiences still hungry for American entertainment.

### **The Early 2000's Sample and Analysis**

The years between 2000-2010 produced a very large number of college professor films, and many of them featured leading characters who endured a wide range of negative characteristics, behaviors and circumstances: mental illness (*A Beautiful Mind*, 2001; *Proof*, 2006), depression and grief (*A Single Man*, 2009; *A Serious Man*, 2009; *Little Miss Sunshine*, 2006), alcohol and drug use (*The Life of David Gale*, 2003; *A Love Song for Bobby Long*, 2004; *Wonder Boys*, 2000), stealing and cheating (*The Ladykillers*, 2004; *21*, 2008), adultery and sex with students (*Learning Curves*, 2003; *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, 2004; *The Squid and the Whale*, 2005; *Elegy*, 2008), illness and emotional pain (*The Savages*, 2007; *Wit*, 2001; *The Reaping*, 2007; *Smart People*, 2008; *Knowing*, 2009), and murder and suicide (*21 Grams*, 2003; *88 Minutes*, 2007). The early

2000's film sample includes two blockbuster films (*The DaVinci Code*, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*) one critically acclaimed large budget film (*Kinsey*) and two critically-acclaimed low budget independent films (*The Squid and the Whale*, *The Savages*).

In the early 2000's audiences were presented with a new action-adventure professor hero, and the long-awaited return of an older one. In *The DaVinci Code*, Tom Hanks plays Dr. Robert Langdon, a Harvard University professor of symbology and iconography who becomes embroiled in a serial murder mystery. Like Indiana Jones, Langdon uses his intellectual skills to solve the murderer's puzzles and save the day. Unlike Jones, Langdon is not the prototypical American action hero. He doesn't engage in fistfights or shoot a gun, and he doesn't carry a whip or sword. Instead, he relies on his wit, brains, and esoteric knowledge to become a kind of "thinking man's" hero.

*The DaVinci Code's* production resembles the Indiana Jones films in its generous use of expensive cinematic blockbuster-style techniques – intricate dolly and crane camera moves, exotic filming locations, digital and practical special effects, and a carefully arranged and professionally performed orchestral music score. Langdon is presented as a fashionable figure, wearing a navy suit and black button down shirt open at the collar with no tie. Although he speaks with a Midwest American accent, his wardrobe and appearance is more continental. He is well groomed, fit, clean-shaven, tee totaling, chatty and friendly with fans and colleagues, and very kind to his female co-adventurer, Sophie (Audrey Tautou). Throughout the film, many scenes are lit in chiaroscuro; high contrast with highly saturated blacks and cool, dark blues. Langdon is often seen in the dark, but he's usually emerging from it or searching through it, and he often brings literal

and figurative light to the darkest sets. Moreover, the classical editing, shot composition and shot selection present him as a classically heroic character who prevails with grace and style. Similarly, the 2008 version of Indiana Jones presents the stalwart college professor adventurer in a very positive manner. The entire film is rendered in warm hues, and makes extensive use of a bright, high contrast palette and filters that are very kind to Ford's aging face. This film is far less bloody and violent than the earlier ones, and in the classroom, Indy is relaxed, hale, and far more confident with teaching than he appeared in 1981. His house is plush and filled with fine leather, marble, and wood furniture, and he jokes and laughs easily, and the final scene – depicting Indy's marriage to his lifelong love, Marion – is radiant in white and yellow features. Professor (now Dean) Jones is easily one of the most positive professors on film.

*Kinsey* paints a very different picture of a middle-aged professor. Based on iconoclastic real-life sex researcher Dr. Alfred Kinsey (Liam Neeson), the film chronicles the journey of an obsessive scientist who challenges the puritanical social hierarchy of the 1950's. Dr. Kinsey is initially presented as an indefatigable researcher and teacher who leads his graduate students with confidence and panache. He doesn't drink much or take drugs, but he, his wife, and their colleagues frequently engage in alternative sexual behaviors. When we first see him at the university, he stands tall and lectures without notes in a dark and cozy wood paneled classroom. He's well dressed and well groomed and seems to thrive in the vibrantly colored university setting. Yet, by the end of the film, he's aged significantly. He's begun to slouch and snap angrily at his friends and colleagues. In the film's final act, the interior lighting becomes darker and the contrast increases as somber and sympathetic piano and strings swell in the background. Although

the last few scenes present him as a prophetic, but underappreciated innovator who has changed lives, his plaintive performance suggests both exhaustion and obsession – he utters the last line of the film and turns away from a tall, green tree, “There’s a lot of work to do.” Like Phillip Seymour Hoffman’s drama professor in *The Savages*, Neeson’s Kinsey appears run-down and ill. Both instructors are tireless in their professional and academic pursuits, but in much of the films, they are struggling to keep up with their own lives.

*The Savages* and *The Squid and the Whale* also present troubled college professors who are less heroic than Kinsey. Their formal treatments reflect the lower budgets and faster shooting schedules than the richly financed Kinsey. For example, the lighting in both is very practical and realistic, and the camera moves and shot compositions are basic. In *The Savages*, Hoffman plays a college professor navigating the cognitive decline and death of his father and a tenuous relationship with his sister. Hoffman’s Jon Savage is extremely overweight, unshaven, disheveled, unkempt, slouching and slumping in hiking boots, casual long sleeve button downs, and khakis. In the classroom, he lectures blandly, without passion, and takes a cell phone call in the middle of his presentation. His cluttered and messy house is nearly pitch black, and the exposure relies on practical sources. He has trouble connecting emotionally to his sister, father, or girlfriend. *The Squid and the Whale* presents a similar character in Jeff Daniels’ Professor Bernard Berkman. He shares Savage’s sartorial and housekeeping style, as well as his casual approach to lecturing. However, where Savage is passive and distant, Berkman is selfish, bitter, uncaring, and ethically dubious. He has sex with one of his undergraduate students, pronounces harsh judgment on the physical appearance of his

son's girlfriend, and is verbally abusive to his wife. He regularly uses effete academic language and tries to use his intellect to denigrate others. The lighting, setting, wardrobe, makeup, editing, and direction is very similar to the Savages, but Daniels' performance and the script make this one of the most negative professor depictions in the genre.

While Daniels' character and Kinsey both take selfish, external actions that hurt others, several college professors in this decade sample suffer from an internal negativity marked by grief, depression, irritability, and obsession. They stand in stark contrast to the Indiana Jones and DaVinci Code characters and their able-bodied optimism, yet they are free of the anti-social behavior seen in earlier decades.

### **The Film Industry in the early 2010's**

Thus far, the 2010's have brought more of the same to the U.S. film industry. Consolidation and a dependence on the blockbuster model have resulted in fewer companies making fewer films and making more money from prestigious tent pole productions and franchises. Many of these blockbusters are created to capitalize on the international market, which means that the stories are often about superheroes or contain science fiction or fantasy elements. Such genres are easily accessible to global audiences as fluency in English is not always required to follow action-adventure stories, and the plots are often uncontroversial and can pass the censors of certain nations like China (Mumford, 2017). However, by 2016, the studios successfully producing tent pole blockbusters were competing for a shrinking audience with much of the same type of product. Although the U.S. box office earnings continue to rise, along with ticket prices, the number of Americans going to see movies is dwindling rapidly (Lang, 2017a). Additionally, a preponderance of expensive blockbuster movies released by a small,

although powerful, group of companies is watering down the marketplace (The Economist, 2012, 2013). The studios are recouping most of their expenses on a very few films, which means that if one flops or is obscured by a competing release, the loss is extraordinarily damaging (Turan, 2014).

Earlier in the decade, the picture was brighter, with relaxing regulations and changes in censorship freeing up the traditionally hostile Chinese market to American and international film imports. Additionally, opportunities for Chinese audiences expanded rapidly as the nation increased its construction of movie theaters exponentially – at one point, dozens of screens were being constructed in China each day (Lang, 2017b). The collapse of the DVD sales and rental market has been devastating to the bottom line. Expanded entertainment outlets and viewing platforms like video on demand, internet-based film streaming services, and new paid cable channels appeared to be an opportunity for growth at the start of the decade. However, independent productions by internet-based entertainment providers like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, along with cable TV original series produced by HBO, Showtime, AMC, FX, and others have provided stiff competition for viewers more keen to view content at home or on mobile devices – and they're spending far less to consume filmed entertainment (Lang, 2017a).

Some of this competition has been mitigated by the fact that consolidation of media holdings has provided the big studios with revenue from a number of places – including cable TV. In fact, even for massive blockbuster hits like some recent superhero films, the bulk of the profits are realized after the domestic theatrical run, through international theatrical runs, and internet streaming services. Although U.S. cinema



continues to dominate the world market, generating \$38 billion in 2016, profits for the big companies producing motion pictures continues to decrease rapidly (Rainey, 2016). There is no sign of the blockbuster model expiring anytime soon, and the major studios are not investing much in smaller films, choosing instead to depend heavily on the success of a few tent poles and secure rights to proven film festival-tested independent productions (Lang, 2015). As a result, American viewers are still choosing from a variety of films – both independent and mainstream – although they are not watching them in a theatre nearly as often. Additionally, American film audiences tend to be older than ever, and some observers have speculated that the love affair between America and Hollywood that began in the late 1960's may end in the twilight of the baby boomers (Hoad, 2010; Laham, 2016; Lang, 2017b).

### **The Early 2010's Sample and Analysis**

As of this writing, the decade between 2010 and 2020 will conclude in three years. If the current rate of production of college professor films continues until then, this decade will have produced the second largest number of such titles since the 1970's (2000-2010 produced the most). The film sample for this decade includes films that feature leading characters confronting a number of struggles, including Alzheimer's disease (*Still Alice*, 2014), amnesia and a gun wound to the head (*Inferno*, 2016), excessive alcohol use (*Irrational Man*, 2015; *The Sublime and Beautiful*, 2014; *Larry Crowne*, 2011), gambling addiction (*The Gambler*, 2014), grief over the death of a child (*Arrival*, 2016), adultery and sex with their students (*Irrational Man*, 2015; *The Rewrite*, 2014; *The Sublime and Beautiful*, 2014), and murder (*Irrational Man*, 2015).

In the Academy-award nominated *Arrival*, Amy Adams plays a grief-stricken

linguist and university professor who helps establish communication with extraterrestrials who descend upon earth. Early in the film, her home and office are presented with a dark, monochromatic palette. Muted greens and blues are interspersed with dark shadows, reflecting the depth of her grief over the loss of her teenage daughter. While the dark treatment continues throughout most of the film, the exposure lightens somewhat as she moves toward recognition of a new romance and renewed interest in life. The pacing of the editing is deliberate and slow, enhancing the meditative tone of the film. Dark, thunderous music and dramatic sound design coalesce to underscore the dire implications of Adams' mission to save the planet and her own psyche. Her classroom building and the massive auditorium classroom is extremely dark and under saturated with a low contrast palette. When we first see her teach, Adams wears a button down blouse with cardigan sweater – sleeves rolled up, shirt un-tucked, slacks. Hair is pulled back up top, and long in the back. It's simple, practical, and neat. In the end, her long hair is down around her shoulders. She's drinking wine in a relaxed sleeveless dress in her still dark, blue-tinged house. Moments later, she embraces her new partner (Jeremy Renner as Dr. Ian Donnelly) as he asks, "You wanna make a baby?" She embraces him tightly, staring off into the darkened distance, sadly. She closes her eyes and says, "Yes. Yeah." She answers, breathily over pensive and plaintive strings. She's still the heroine, still mourning, but hopeful.

*Inferno* is strikingly similar to *Arrival* in its initial dystopian prediction for the future of humanity. The third installment of the Da Vinci Code franchise – told once again by "America's nice guy," Tom Hanks - abandons the cool chiaroscuro lighting and TV thriller style editing of the earlier two films for a highly saturated, frenetically paced

rendering of a fragile world threatened by a seemingly unstoppable plague. While *Arrival's* Adams is lethargic and dreamy, floating from clue to clue in a lush, greenish world of silence occasionally punctuated by deep rumbling, *Inferno* follows Hanks' professor Langdon as he frantically tries solve the plague mystery before it's too late, all the while suffering from amnesia and bullet wound in his head. *Inferno's* editing is ostentatious, making regular use of quick cuts, jump cuts, shaky and moving camera shots. The color palette is alternately hot and warm – sharp reds and yellows frame brightly lit outdoor shots where Hanks squints against the sun, struggling with the cognitive and physical symptoms of his injury. The harsh sound design and relentless soundtrack batter the viewer and our hero from the opening to closing credits. Here, Langdon is in far more danger than ever before. While he regularly faced death from external forces in the first two films, in the third he struggles against more potent internal foes – one that threaten his most salient strengths, his intellect and wit.

Similarly, *Still Alice* paints the portrait of a successful college professor, Dr. Alice Howland, played by Julianne Moore, whose career, marriage, and family are devastated by early onset Alzheimer's disease. Moore – who won an Academy Award for Best Actress for her performance – presents a lively, engaged, intelligent, married mother of young adults who is also a well respected and widely renowned linguistics professor at Columbia University. Like Hanks' character in *Inferno*, her prodigious intellect is challenged by a physical ailment beyond her control. However, the formal treatment of her struggle is vastly different from *Inferno* or *Arrival*. When we first see her, she is charming, attractive, and elegantly dressed in full makeup, sipping Sake and chatting vibrantly with her family. Her upper middle class home features fine wood trim,

expensive furniture and some antiques. The soft lighting and shallow focus pulls the viewer deep into her face as her cognitive deterioration proceeds. Despite the flattering pinkish-brown, low contrast lighting throughout, the professor looks more haggard as the film progresses. As she slides into her final decline, gentle piano and strings accompany the more tragically touching scenes. Despite a late connection with her youngest daughter in a poignant final scene, this characterization is truly tragic, and overwhelmingly negative.

Although the comedic drama *Tumbledown* is one of the lightest films in the sample, it tackles grief and suicide directly – telling the story of an unlikely romance between a grieving young widow (Rebecca Hall) and an ambitious young college professor (Jason Sudeikis). Set primarily in rural Maine, the independent film portrays Sudeikis as a tenure-seeking, “fish out of water” professor working on a book about the widow’s recently departed musician husband. The editing and pace of the film resembles the classical Hollywood style, relying on simple shot selections, smooth transitions, and subtle comedic timing. The subtle and sympathetic musical score punctuates the alternately comedic and dramatic plot points with regularity, and Sudeikis’ beard, glasses, brown corduroys, and provincial good looks combine to present an accessible professor character who still inhabits some of the pretensions of his native hipster New York City subculture. Yet, Sudeikis briefly steps out of the usual leading romantic leading man persona when he confesses to Hall that his father committed suicide, that he has taken antidepressants in the past, and that he has a fondness for whiskey. Additionally, the gray skies, bare trees, and muddy hills of Maine in winter provide a bleak canvas for the film’s more somber notes, such as when the professor ventures to the site of the

husband/musician's death on the side of a cliff. While the formal aspects of this portrayal are more traditional and less expressionistic than *Inferno*, *Arrival*, or *Still Alice*, the dialogue between the two leading characters and the formal tone of the film reveals a palpable familiarity with internal suffering.

*Larry Crowne*, produced and directed by Tom Hanks, is an even more straightforward romantic comedy than *Tumbledown*. Starring Hanks as the titular leading character and Julia Roberts as Mercedes Tainot, a speech professor at a small community college, *Crowne* received a lukewarm reception by critics and audiences. While it lacks the darker tones of *Tumbledown*, the film portrays Mercedes as a hard drinking, sarcastic, unhappy, dispassionate, bitter teacher trapped in an unhappy marriage. The dialogue frequently refers to her feelings of inadequacy; she has a master's degree, not a doctorate, and she's teaching speech at a bland community college, rather than "Shakespeare and Shaw" at a state university. After a difficult night with her husband, she drunkenly tries to seduce Larry, who has been excelling in her public speaking class. After her husband goes to jail for drinking and driving, the romantic relationship between she and Larry begins to blossom, and the cinematic production techniques change along with her character. Early in the film, Mercedes is accompanied by a blues/rock score, and she staggers in and out of her dimly lit office, frequently swallowing pills to medicate a hangover. By the end of the film, the music is full of soft and romantic guitars and the lighting is more dynamic than the flat, high key treatment Roberts received for most of the film. Similarly, the photographic depth of field is shallower and the selective focus draws the viewer's attention to Roberts' attractive face and fit frame – now smiling more and walking taller than before – as she cheerfully engages her students in what is now a

colorful, comfortably lit classroom. The highly stylized tone at the end of the film is a clear departure from the dull realism of earlier scenes, as is Mercedes' transformation from depression and anger to joy.

While Mercedes finally achieves happiness, she experiences a fair amount of internal suffering along the way. She is not alone in this decade. In fact, every single professor character in the 2010 sample suffers from a conspicuous amount of internal suffering, rendered for the screen through heavy drinking, grief, depression, obsession, physical injury, and cognitive decline. Overall, the type of negativity depicted in this sample is dramatically different from that portrayed in the 1970's sample and provides further indication of increasing internal negativity in college professor films.

### **Discussion of Findings and Limitations**

The analysis of the college professor film sample from between 1970 and 2016 yields a number of findings. When considering formal aspects, character elements, and the dramatic narrative of each film and for each decade, there is evidence that cinematic presentations of the college professor as a lead character in these sample films have changed since 1970, and that depictions vary throughout the intervening decades. While there is some variation in how much negativity is portrayed, the type of negativity displayed has changed. The films from the 1970's sample present a number of negative college professor depictions. In all five of the films – *Straw Dogs*, *The Paper Chase*, *The Gambler*, *The Eiger Sanction*, and *Manhattan* – the leading college professor character is either a villain or an anti-hero. These professors lie, cheat, seduce, steal, bully, manipulate or kill others for their own gain. They are often literally plunged into darkness or set in lavish surroundings and self-indulgent attire that reflects their own greed or

vanity. Most notably, three of the 1970's sample professors engage in explicit physical violence and overtly transgressive behaviors – actions rarely seen in the sample between 1980-2015. Additionally, none of them are explicitly punished for their transgressions. This runs contrary to the traditional tendency of Hollywood to ensure that bad behavior is sanctioned on screen, and is consonant with the new American film movement and its rejection of the old censorship code.

Conversely, most of the college professors in the 1980's film sample are depicted positively, as heroic protagonists. Indiana Jones is the prototypical cinematic adventurer/intellectual who uses both his brains and brawn to solve the puzzles necessary to defeat the antagonists. He's consistently rendered as the all-American movie star – the focus of all of the good light, camera angles, wardrobe, and music. The film's editing and stunt work presents him as an excellent athlete – an unusual trait for cinematic academicians - and in each installment, he is presented as a conscientious college instructor, hardworking colleague, and archetypal gentleman. The few negative aspects of Indy's personality seem to be excused – his violence is reserved for the “bad guys,” and past sexual indiscretions are downplayed.

*Desert Hearts'* Vivian is depicted positively throughout the film, becoming even more admirable through her willingness to risk social shame and legal complications for true love. Ultimately, she emerges as an emotionally complex, thoughtful, and generous character, and her intellectual life is framed sympathetically. Even the puckish Dr. Venkman (*Ghostbusters*) emerges as a hero in the traditional comedic style, and both the formal treatment and narrative ultimately frame him as the hardworking, brave, self-sacrificial action-adventure movie hero who is unafraid to (literally) get dirty in order to

secure the safety of others. Overall, the 1980's sample provides very positive professor characters. They appear to be able and free of addictions and other psychological afflictions. The only negative characters are the two academics in *Lianna*, one self-obsessed and indecisive, the other, physically violent and unfaithful in his marriage. Here, the physical violence, although clearly anti-social, is not the lethal kind we see in *Straw Dogs*, *The Gambler*, or *The Eiger Sanction*.

The 1990's sample brings a mix of depictions. Without representation from the Indiana Jones franchise, the depictions are slightly more negative than those of the 1980's. *Good Will Hunting*, however, stands out as one of the most positive professor portrayals in cinema history. Despite Professor Sean Maguire's grief and affection for alcohol, nearly every time he's on screen he is presented as a tireless, selfless, humble, nurturing mentor, surrounded by warm, flattering, light. *The Nutty Professor's* Dr. Klump, while an ultimately positive character, is continually played for laughs and embodies a number of negative professorial stereotypes. The technical and formal treatment resembles a straightforward college comedy, which allows the performance to dominate the depiction. *Husbands and Wives* presents an unsympathetic college professor character who endangers his marriage when he develops an attraction to one of his students. The shaky camera and reality television style editing contribute to the unnerving characterization, and Allen's protagonist is eventually "punished" with loneliness and regret. *Quiz Show* depicts a duplicitous and selfish college professor who is also punished and shamed in the end of the film. Professor Van Doren's classical formal rendering both celebrates and indicts Ivy League snobbery while the conclusion warns against the dangers of intellectual hubris. *Reversal of Fortune* offers a very sympathetic depiction of



a well-respected college instructor, mentor, and lawyer while glazing lightly over the troubling ethical dimensions of his work on a celebrity case. While the formal presentation is generally positive, the dialogue stirs doubt about the professor's moral standing. Overall, most of the negativity present in this decade's sample is concerned with selfish desires for fame, money, sex, renown, or physical beauty. The "villains" here use their minds, rather than their bodies, to acquire their goals, and while some of their actions may be misguided and unethical, they are not physically violent, ill, or incapacitated.

While the 1990's sample featured some films with more nuanced depictions of professors than the 1980's sample, the early 2000's sample films suggest a stark divide between positive and negative portrayals. On the one hand, the formal and narrative treatment of the Indiana Jones character in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* is the most traditionally heroic of the entire franchise, and *The DaVinci Code* introduces audiences to a new action/professor hero with a very sympathetic rendering. On the other hand, the remaining sample films proffer a direr cast of characters. *Kinsey*, *The Squid and the Whale*, and *The Savages* contain professor leads that struggle with grief, loss, emotional disconnection, fatigue, illness, adultery, obsession, and depression - and the formal treatments and nuanced performances reflected the depth of their suffering.

Liam Neeson's *Kinsey* is the most positive of the three, as the researcher eventually ensures his legacy through self-sacrifice, but the formal treatment paints him as a troubled, mercurial, ailing character. *The Savages* ends on a promising note, but Hoffman's disheveled and depressed professor has just begun his journey of recovery when the film ends. Finally, *The Squid and the Whale* depicts one of the most

psychologically troubled, selfish, and cruel professor characters in the entire sample. Jeff Daniels' professor is painted as an immature, disheveled, and shiftless philanderer and reckless father. In contrast with the violence and anti-social transgressions of the 1970's sample, and the ethical ambivalence or duplicity of the 1990's, these professor characters embody negativity through their mental and emotional states, and their internal struggles are mirrored in the difficult circumstances that surround them.

The trend of the internally struggling professor both continues and intensifies into the 2010's sample. These protagonists suffer an inordinate amount of psychic and physical pain, and in contrast to many of the films in earlier decades, the personal pain is explicitly depicted through various cinematic techniques. From early onset Alzheimer's disease to a serious head wound and brain injury, and from amnesia and alcohol abuse to suicide attempts, and the pain of losing a child, the college professors in *Still Alice*, *Larry Crowne*, *Tumbledown*, *Arrival*, and *Inferno* struggle to find solutions as their greatest individual resources – their minds – are turned against them. The comedy, *Tumbledown*, the brightest depiction in the decade sample, is cast in damp, dark, and wintry tones and tackles suicide and grief directly. In the end, despite much *sturm und drang*, the professor's bright disposition, drive, and resilience is rewarded with the promise of romantic love. Similarly, the symbologist and adventuring professor Langdon in *Inferno* finally prevails, but the crucible he endures – along with the viewer - is relentless. The expressionistic editing, sound design, and cinematography underscore a hectic struggle against powerful internal and external forces.

Likewise, *Arrival's* dark green and blue hues, dampness, sparse composition, selective camera focus, ominous sound design, and subtle performances underscore the

grievous journey that Adams' character barely overcomes. *Still Alice*, which unflinchingly chronicles the suffering and total decline of a successful professor and mother, and the dissolution of her family, may be the most negative film in the entire sample. The formal treatment chronicles her progressive illness directly and unflinchingly, without sentimentality, forcing the viewer to confront the reality of the situation without any optimistic Hollywood-style flourishes. Alternately, *Larry Crowne*, the second romantic comedy of the decade sample, gives audiences a lazy, hard drinking, acerbic professor whose transformation is underscored by Hollywood style film-star lighting, makeup and wardrobe. The classic *fall and rise* plot relies upon a number of traditional cinematic techniques to underscore the professor's personal and professional misery and eventual recovery. However, the misfortune visited upon this professor character contributes to a theme that resounds throughout the decade sample; the professor is not well.

Ultimately, depictions in the five-decade sample have changed over time, both in the amount of negativity surrounding the professor characters and in the type of negativity expressed. After the negative 1970's portrayals, the 1980's brought some brief optimism and positivity – primarily, but not solely, through the Indiana Jones installments. The 1990's signaled a move toward more nuanced and negative characterizations both in independent and high budget projects, and many of the negative depictions concerned ethical behaviors. The 2000's marked an increase in explicit depictions of internal struggle, and by the 2010's, emotionally troubled professors dominated the sample. Overall, it appears that some pop cultural observers may be correct in recognizing worsening professor depictions – especially considering the

increase in depictions that focus on physical and psychic suffering. However, are the suggested reasons for this trend convincing? Are the darkening characterizations related to rise in anti-intellectualism in American culture and an attendant distrust of academicians? Have motion pictures – along with all mass mediated entertainment – become darker and more pessimistic? Have filmmakers abandoned positive portrayals of educators altogether? Why do portrayals of college professors on film seem to be growing more negative? A number of factors should be considered.

First, market forces that influence the business of Hollywood will influence the types of films that are being made at any one time. For example, the film industry of the early 1970's relied upon young, idealistic and counter-cultural film directors to create content that would appeal to adventurous young audiences seeking narrative and formal innovation. As a result, darker and more challenging films like *Straw Dogs* and *The Gambler* were produced and distributed by major studios. Conversely, the new blockbuster movement of the 1980's produced a number of positive, family-friendly stories that would attract general audience viewers, like the Indiana Jones films. Furthermore, increasing demographic diversity in American audiences, more affordable production technology, and new viewing channels have contributed to the increased production and distribution of independent and alternative films since the 1980's. For example, films like *Desert Hearts*, *Lianna*, *The Squid and the Whale*, *The Savages*, *Still Alice* were initially created by studio "outsiders" and vetted by film festivals or studio executives before being distributed by the larger corporations. Projects like *Tumbledown* - independent productions picked up and distributed by smaller companies – became more common since the late 1980's and 1990's. While major studios still appear to be

skittish about financing such alternative titles with their own money, they are willing to purchase then for distribution. Therefore, the variation in content among the sample over the decades may reflect the movements of the marketplace. The general trends in studio offerings reflect how content can change in response to market forces: studios backed some experimental projects in the 1970's, blockbusters in the 1980's, independents in the 1990's, franchises from the 2000's forward, diverse titles in the 2010's. Thus, one might expect to see more complex and nuanced fare as the studios now seek additional revenue in various *niche* viewing outlets, which could explain the recent increase in what might be considered negative characterizations.

Second, audience tastes may have changed alongside economic factors and viewing habits. A greater number of Americans are now consuming filmed entertainment at home, and fewer are going to the theater – a trend that began in the 1980's and continues to accelerate. Home and personal viewing allows audience members to view filmed content they may not have normally consumed under the older model. For example, adults with young children can watch films with mature themes at home on the internet, DVD, or cable, after the children are asleep without having to either pay for childcare or find a movie that the whole family can see. Additionally, users can now view films privately on their personal digital devices from nearly any location. This viewing scenario has become popular among financially strapped and technologically comfortable young *millennials*, who want to view titles on their own terms and are reluctant to pay for expensive theater seats. The move away from theatrical viewing allows filmmakers more freedom and flexibility to create fare that appeals to more mature or receptive audiences.

In turn, these “adult-themed” films may seem more negative when compared to large studio films deemed suitable for widespread theatrical releases.

Non-blockbuster, indie-style projects like *Still Alice* and *Arrival* have certainly become more available to wider audiences through a variety of channels. As a result, producers and distributors may be creating more of these types of projects in an effort to meet a potentially lucrative audience segment – one that will view films mostly outside of the theater, after the initial theatrical run. Therefore, the recent appearance of more negative films about college professors (or any leading profession for that matter) may be due in part to this new viewing paradigm. Additionally, audience tastes for certain expressionistic cinematic techniques may have evolved alongside their tolerance for controversial or previously taboo material. Just as contemporary audiences are now comfortable with cinematic content that had been censored or shunned in the past – such as explicit violence, full nudity, homosexuality, and drug use - viewers now may be more comfortable with a number of formal techniques that may have annoyed or disturbed audiences in earlier years. Very low lighting, high contrast exposures, extremely fast editing, loud sonic elements, expressive sound design, highly stylized color palettes, complex and parallel plots, temporal compression and distortion, 3D, and realistic digital special effects are now regular characteristics of many mainstream films, and audience members have adjusted to such techniques. Therefore, when basing assessments of negativity on formal elements, care must be taken to adjust for the evolution of viewer’s tolerance for what may have been construed as negative in the past.

Third, improvements in digital technology and low cost production equipment and special effects make certain types of formal techniques more accessible to both large

budget and small budget productions. For example, the low-light, monochromatic, shallow focus cinematography of *Arrival* would have prohibitively expensive and impractical in the 1980's and 90's. The basic level of illumination required for the camera to achieve proper exposure without unacceptable visual distortion would have greatly affected the decision to achieve a certain "look" in times past. Now, digital *high definition video* and *4K* imaging resolution, more sensitive cameras with more exposure latitude, improved lens technology, exceptional surround sound recording and digital audio mixing technology has made certain, previously difficult aesthetic approaches de rigueur today. As such, more recently produced films may be literally darker and louder, with shakier camera shots and more selective focus than films produced with less sophisticated technological tools. As a result, a formal analysis of the newer titles may cause the analyst and viewer to construe them as more negative than older titles. The newer productions may just be more effective at conveying and evoking intense emotions through highly stylistic techniques that take advantage of technological advances.

Fourth, social attitudes toward traditionally negative traits may have changed over the years, which may have affected cinematic representations. As the production code and its attendant censorship recedes further into distant history, ratings boards for theatrical releases have become more tolerant of violent, explicit, and sexually charged scenes and producers have responded by creating films with more "daring" content. Increased viewing opportunities on streaming channels (Netflix and Hulu) through personal and home-based devices allow filmmakers to offer programming that is nearly uncensored, as opposed to their TV network colleagues, whose work is regulated by the *Federal Communications Commission*. Perhaps increased tolerance for mature themes in

mainstream films, and audience interest in previously taboo content reflects changes in audience expectations of cinematic characters – especially heroes. Most of the protagonists in the 2000’s and 2010’s professor film sample are inherently flawed, and their liabilities are explicitly, and in most cases, sympathetically depicted. Many of the professors in the 1970’s sample are flawed as well, but much of their internal suffering and psychic struggle is either obscured by their physical violence, or manifested through their arrogance or dishonesty. In contrast to the newer sample films, there is very little self-reflection or opportunity for redemption. Filmmakers may now have both increased interest and greater opportunities to depict emotionally complex and psychologically vulnerable characters, and audiences may now have more tolerance for such characters in a leading role. Thus, a comparison of negative characterizations across the decades must account for variability in social conceptions of negativity.

Fifth, the relationship between high-budget blockbuster productions and low-budget independent-style productions may affect the content of films in each category, as well as the sample selection for his project. As mentioned earlier, lower-budget independent films that are not funded by a major motion picture studio tend to provide content that is more nuanced, daring, and emotionally complex than major studio films and blockbusters. This is due in large part to the fact that studios are often averse to spending money on films that may alienate general audiences (both domestic and international) and thus fail to make a profit. Blockbusters traditionally treat their characters in a “heroic” way – the protagonist may be imperfect, but they are clearly the “good guy.” They are often presented as honest, brave, self-sacrificial, able-bodied, emotionally stable, and mentally healthy. Independent films, however, are more likely to



feature flawed, realistic, or anti-heroic characters. Thus, in this film sample, large budget films are more likely to contain more positive characters and small budget films are more likely to contain relatively negative ones. This can obscure the identification of trends in negative portrayals over time, unless the analysis accounts for the particular market forces of each decade.

For example, in a decade dominated by large budget, theatrically released, internationally marketed studio films like the 1980's and the 2000's, studios and financiers may be more likely to select and produce products that appeal to large audiences. Hence, in general, the leading college professor characters in mainstream films may be more positive – more “blockbuster-ready” - than they would be in a decade dominated by a regional and domestic theatrical model such as the 1970's and earlier 1980's. Furthermore, in an effort to differentiate themselves and their productions from mainstream productions, indie filmmakers may intentionally create products that differ significantly from popular fare. As more blockbusters with straightforward treatments of main characters are made and distributed, alternative filmmakers may be drawn to produce even more challenging, edgy, and introspective films than they have in the past. In turn, such alternative titles may be highly rated by critics and online aggregators, which would push their scores up high enough to be included in the “critically acclaimed” portion of the film sample used here. Thus, films with more “negative” portrayals could be disproportionately represented in the sample during some decades. Their inclusion might have produced an indication of a trend that may have not been observed with a larger, more inclusive sample. In other words, the sample selection criteria I used may not reliably capture the most viewed college professor films across the

decades, which questions the durability of the sample, the proposed trend, and the ability to extrapolate representational data from the selection.

Finally, as suggested by many others (e.g. Long, 1996; Reynolds, 2014; Williams, 2010; DiPaolo, 2015; Craft, 2012), these worsening characterizations may reflect growing dissatisfaction with higher education and, in turn, college professors. The extent to which a causal relationship can be demonstrated between public attitudes and filmic narratives is still a matter of debate, yet changes in popular depictions of various social players provide an opportunity and an impetus to examine public discourse surrounding associated institutions like higher education. A number of factors may have contributed to the growing unpopularity of colleges and universities: tuition and student fees at all types of institutions have increased, state funding has decreased, federal grants and scholarship dollars do not cover as much as they did in the past, wages among college grads are flat, student loan debt is growing, loan defaults continue to rise, a college degree is nearly essential for entry into the upper middle class, undergraduate degrees are ubiquitous (and redundant) in some fields. These factors, coupled with growing anti-intellectualism in America (Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017a, 2017b; Hofstadter, 1963), escalating neoliberal academic practices, and the prevalence of conservative policies surrounding public funding (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), may have contributed to the negative trends now observed in some polls (Fingerhut, 2017). In short, if we consider popular motion pictures to be a part of the public discourse surrounding higher education, then we must consider the possibility that recent negative cinematic depictions may be somehow related to a decline in public trust.

More research is needed to fully investigate the changing nature of professor depictions in American films. The construction and dissemination of motion pictures is a complex process that relies upon a number of social, artistic, and economic factors. Additional analysis of college professors in filmed narratives should include a diversity of voices and perspectives. As this paper has documented variations in the negative portrayals of professors over time, future investigations could endeavor to measure the same trend among films that feature protagonists from other professions. Such a project could aim to determine whether negative characterizations have changed only for professors, or for characters in American films in general. Future research on college professor films could also aim to include the voices of other stakeholders; audience members, studio executives, filmmakers, educators and higher education administrators. Additionally, future projects could investigate how recent challenges to the American higher education system and anti-intellectual sentiments may have influenced the types of films being made about college professors. As the academy is under unprecedented scrutiny, a better understanding of how these mass mediated narratives are constructed and consumed could provide key insights on how the public discourse surrounding higher education is changing.

Table 1

*Professor Film Sample*

Film Title	Type of Production	Decade	Genre	Professor Character Discipline and Key Characteristics
Inferno	Studio	2010's	Action/Adventure	Symbology, Wounded, Confused, Intelligent
Arrival	Independent	2010's	Drama/Mystery	Linguistics, Grieving, Depressed, Intelligent
Tumbledown	Independent	2010's	Comedy/Romance	Popular Culture, Obsessive, Sensitive
Still Alice	Independent	2010's	Drama	Linguistics, Chronically Ill, Depressed
Larry Crowne	Studio	2010's	Comedy/Romance	Speech/Drama, Hard Drinking, Frustrated
Indiana Jones (Crystal Skull)	Studio	2000's	Action/Adventure	Anthropology, Heroic, Successful, Charming
The Savages	Independent	2000's	Comedy/Drama	Theater, Grieving, Depressed
The DaVinci Code	Studio	2000's	Mystery/Thriller	Symbology, Heroic, Successful, Intelligent
The Squid and the Whale	Independent	2000's	Comedy/Drama	Creative Writing, Selfish, Philandering
Kinsey	Studio	2000's	Biography/Drama	Biology, Heroic, Obsessive, Moody
Good Will Hunting	Studio	1990's	Drama	Psychology, Heroic, Mentoring, Grieving
The Nutty Professor	Studio	1990's	Comedy/Romance	Chemistry, Bumbling, Socially Awkward
Quiz Show	Studio	1990's	Biography/Drama	English, Intelligent, Deceptive, Amoral
Husbands and Wives	Independent	1990's	Comedy/Drama	Creative Writing, Philandering, Neurotic
Reversal of Fortune	Independent	1990's	Biography/Drama	Law, Intelligent, Successful, Driven

Table 1 (continued)

Indiana Jones (Last Crusade)	Studio	1980's	Action/Adventure	Anthropology, Heroic, Athletic, Intelligent
Desert Hearts	Independent	1980's	Drama/Romance	English, Intelligent, Successful, Heroic
Ghostbusters	Studio	1980's	Action/Comedy	Parapsychology, Humorous, Crafty, Heroic
Lianna	Independent	1980's	Drama/Romance	Psychology, Successful, Emotionally Distant
Raiders of the Lost Ark	Studio	1980's	Action/Adventure	Anthropology, Heroic, Athletic, Intelligent
Manhattan	Independent	1970's	Comedy/Drama	English, Philandering, Arrogant, Materialistic
The Eiger Sanction	Studio	1970's	Action/Crime	Art History, Violent, Wealthy, Anti- Heroic
The Gambler	Studio	1970's	Crime/Drama	Creative Writing, Immoral, Addicted, Violent
The Paper Chase	Studio	1970's	Comedy/Drama	Law, Arrogant, Cruel, Affluent
Straw Dogs	Independent	1970's	Crime/Drama	Mathematics, Intelligent, Mercurial, Violent, Anti-Heroic

### **SECTION 3: FILM FACULTY ON FACULTY FILMS: INSTRUCTORS, MAKERS, AND USERS**

In *Celluloid Ivy: Higher Education in the Movies, 1960-1990* (1994), David Hinton writes that “Movies...stand as a major part of higher education’s historical record, whether we like it or not” (pp. 142–143). In addition to being an indelible part of American history, cinematic depictions of college professors are part of the national discourse on the role and function of the faculty and university. An investigation of how these representations influence real-life college professors may provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between popular culture images and the academic profession. Furthermore, an exploration of how film professors function as an interpretive community in the reception of filmic texts may illuminate how such groups create shared conceptions of real-life and archetypal academicians. Educational and family background, personal academic experiences, exposure to certain films, and larger cultural currents may converge to create a community predisposed to conceive of their own profession in a unique way – one that may differ widely from popular conceptions. In order to capture the attitudes and expectations of such a group, this paper focuses on faculty members who teach, study, and produce films, and endeavors to explore how they respond to depictions of college professors in leading roles in American feature-length motion pictures.

#### **Depictions of Professors on Film – the Literature**

Depictions of college professors in American films are common, and while a number of studies have investigated various aspects of college life in motion pictures, few have focused exclusively on the cinematic professoriate. Umphlett (1984), Hinton

(1994) and Conklin (2008) authored comprehensive accounts on higher education and the movies, providing exhaustive production histories, documenting changes to the depictions of college over the years, and discussing the role of social and economic forces in shaping these narratives. Currie (2010), Dittus (2007), and Tucciarone-Mackin (2004) focused on how various film audiences may be affected by cinematic representations of higher education. A few researchers have examined college professor depictions within a certain time frame (Oliker, 1993), a specific film genre, (Thomas, 2009), or from a specific academic discipline, such as law (Papke, 2003) and science (Kirby, 2014). Other researchers have noted that cinematic college professors are often portrayed negatively and that such depictions serve to “mis-educate” the public about the reality of academics and academicians (Long, 1996; Reynolds, 2007; Reynolds, 2014; Polan, 1993).

Moreover, some have claimed that recent films that depict college professors exacerbate an already inaccurate stereotype – that of the drunken, out-of-touch, absent-minded, vituperative, philandering male professor who avoids any “real” work by hiding out in the ivory tower (Overall, 2010; DiPaolo, 2015; Roberts, 2010; Thomas, 2009; Guillermo, 2015). Others cite a preponderance of misanthropic and depressed characters in recent films as being obsessed with tenure, sex, or oblivion (Williams, 2010; Yaffe, 2015; Deresiewicz, 2007), and Craft (2012) asserts that some contemporary films question the usefulness of a liberal arts education and college in general. Ultimately, there is no doubt that negative behavior by professors in American motion pictures is common. Desperate, depraved, supercilious, or silly academics can be found in films as diverse as *Ball of Fire* (1941), *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), *Animal House*

(1978), *D.O.A.* (1988), *The Wonder Boys* (2000), and *Doctor Detroit* (1983), just to name a few.

A number of films feature professor characters who suffer from mental or physical duress that threatens their career, family, or existence. Relatively recent examples include *Proof* (2005), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Flash of Genius* (2008), *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (2004), *The Visitor* (2008), *A Single Man* (2009), *A Serious Man*, (2009), *The Sublime and Beautiful* (2014), and *Irrational Man* (2015), *Still Alice* (2015) and *Wit* (2001). For the past several decades, popular college films have depicted casual sex between professors and students. *The Squid and the Whale* (2005), *Husbands and Wives* (1992), *Storytelling* (2001), *R.P.M.* (1970), *Animal House* (1978), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Irrational Man* (2015), *The Rewrite* (2014), and *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (2004) are notable examples. At times, professors are also depicted as being abusive or derisive to students - *Whiplash* (2014), *The Paper Chase* (1973), *Smart People* (2008), *Larry Crowne* (2011), *The Eiger Sanction* (1975), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) - or absent minded and bumbling - *The Nutty Professor* (1996), *The Absent Minded Professor* (1961), *Knowing* (2009), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004).

The question as to whether these films borrow from pre-existing cultural stereotypes or contribute to them has yet to be definitively answered. However, some university instructors and researchers have expressed concern about their real-life implications (Reynolds, 2014 and 2007; Long, 1996; Moore, 2017; Roberts, 2010). Professorial stereotypes have endured in popular culture for decades, but the academic profession has evolved quickly as of late, transformed by new technology, changing



demographics, national and state politics, and international influences. Several well-respected and widely cited works have explored the intricacies of the real-life academic profession and the associated challenges of the past 30 years. For example, in 1997, Burton Clark discussed the unusual and sometimes arcane landscape that the academician had to navigate as an instructor, researcher and social actor. He also predicted that a number of trends would challenge the professoriate in America - excessive teaching requirements, instructor burnout, declining professorial influence on the academic organization, and a fragmenting of academic culture, among others. In 2006, Schuster and Finkelstein documented how a number of these same trends have disrupted the traditional university system and significantly changed the expectations and responsibilities of the professoriate. They state that faculty members are being asked to do “more” work while institutions are increasing their use of contingent, part-time instructors and hiring fewer on the tenure track.

Others researchers have investigated how popular culture texts shape the collective images and expectations of teachers and schooling. Weber and Mitchell (1995) explore popular culture representations of teachers in North America and Great Britain and identify the persistence of tropes that shape real life teacher identities and those of their students’ conceptions of them. Similarly, Farber, Provenzo & Holm (1994) examine how popular texts that address schooling – such as films, television shows, the print content, and music – influence the social discourse on education and educators. Spring (1992), also explores the power of mass media in the construction of public attitudes toward education. Considering both fictional images and reality, Long (1996) laments the decline in positive professor portrayals on film, television, and popular cartoons in the

1990's, pointing to a concomitant rise in anti-intellectualism and public distrust of the liberal arts as a worthwhile curricular and professional path. She argues that the deeply entrenched American ideals of hard work, practical knowledge and common sense reflect the post-American Revolution era's rejection of the aristocratic European university model and its attendant intellectualism (however, the critique of intellectuals and the professoriate in America may have occurred well before revolutionary times, perhaps as early as the late 1600's (Hofstadter, 1963).

Furthermore, Long contended that negative professor portrayals in popular culture both reflect and reinforce the existing attitudes of the American public, and that these caricatures are becoming more extreme. She suggests that this may indicate rising dissatisfaction with an increasingly commodified system of higher education – a claim reflected in more recent research on media representations (Reynolds, 2014; Tobolowsky and Reynolds, 2007) and public attitudes toward higher education in general (Immerwahr, 2004). Oliker (1993) documented a similar trend in some depictions. After tracing the development of the on-screen educator (both high school and college) from the 1930's through the 1980's, he concludes that the cinematic instructor represents changing public attitudes towards schools and universities. From the optimistic and romanticized portrayals of the 1930's to the tough-as-nails teachers of the early 70's, he asserts that these characters represent our ever-changing relationship with the educational institutions that have shaped us.

### **Public Perceptions of College Faculty**

Why should higher education researchers or practitioners care about the cinematic representations of college faculty? Moreover, what is the value in studying them?

Blackburn and Lawrence suggest that the public misunderstanding of the profession and acrimony toward its denizens is reason enough:

Faculty are at the heart of this perceived turmoil...They are a large workforce...often not understood – at times, indeed, even misunderstood.

Simultaneously, many outside the academy envy their autonomy, especially their control of their time. It is therefore important to study faculty, to learn about not only how they actually behave but also why they behave as they do. (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995, p. 4)

Such investigation is even more relevant now, as recent changes to American higher education may have spurred a concurrent shift in public attitudes (Postsecondary Education Aspirations and Barriers, 2014; Hersh and Merrow, 2015). Some researchers claim that since the rise in neoliberalism in the 1980's and 1990's, public perception of higher education has become increasingly negative, (Slaughter, 2017; *The Economist*, December 1, 2012; Fishman, Ekowo, & Ezeugo, 2017) and that this shift has been accompanied by a worsening work environment for faculty (Gonzales, et. al., 2014; Levin, 2006). In *Teaching Without Tenure: Policies and Practices for a New Era* (2001), Baldwin and Chronister chronicle the decline in public trust in higher education over the past several decades, and offer several explanations for the trend. Citing seminal works on the relationship between the American public and higher education (Bok, 1992; Fairweather, 1996; and Winston, 1992), the authors outline a number of complaints: colleges are no longer committed to offering undergraduate education, they inflate tuitions and fees in order to ensure revenues, and they hoard grants and contracts. Baldwin and Chronister also claim that the tenure system is under increasing scrutiny –

Americans seem resentful that publicly funded employees (in the case of state universities) are unfairly protected from the contractions of an unpredictable economy, and that they spend too much time outside of the classroom working on their own projects. Further, an increase in neoliberal practices at colleges and universities and an escalating influence of conservative funding policies may have affected public attitudes (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Levine (1997), Immerwahr (2004), Kezar (2005) and others have observed that the worsening relationship between the public and higher education has been exacerbated by declines in state funding for colleges and universities. Contemporaneous demands for available public funds by other social agencies - such as health care and public safety - have continued to grow, encouraging competition and stirring resentment (Hersh and Merrow, 2015). Many researchers agree that the situation is unlikely to improve, as higher education funding will become a lower priority for many states, and public confidence in the traditional service missions of universities will shrink (Heydinger and Simsek 1992; Immerwahr, 2004; Hensley, et. al., 2013). Further, Baldwin and Chronister outline a number of existential threats to college faculty, the traditional college teaching system, and the social contract between “town and gown.” First, an aging American workforce and federal regulations on retirement and age discrimination make the tenure system seem inefficient and bloated. Second, new, inexpensive educational technologies are threatening to transform college professors into technical facilitators of content, rather than professional educators. Third, more distance education programs and online offerings are threatening the hegemony of brick and mortar universities, while for-profit and convenience-based models make use of master’s degreed instructors rather than their

more expensive Ph.D.-bearing colleagues. Finally, Baldwin and Chronister claim that the public seems to be demanding that higher education mirror the market-driven realities and cost-saving strategies of the corporate world through expanded use of contingent workforces and downsized permanent employee rolls. Other scholars have documented a resurgence of anti-intellectual sentiment in American culture and popular media (Claussen, 2004; Noddings, 2007; Skoble, 2001). They suggest that this may have contributed to the loss of public trust in a profession that celebrates the life of the mind, independent inquiry, and scientific research. Others say the relationship between the public and the university has always suffered from American anti-intellectualism (Tobolowsky and Reynolds, 2017a, 2017b; Moore, 2017).

Moreover, recent developments appear to threaten the traditional fulltime and tenure-track model of academic employment. Over the past several years, university spending on instruction has dropped, while spending on athletics and administration has increased exponentially (Desrochers and Kirshstein, 2012). Nationally, the numbers of tenured and tenure track faculty have either stalled or shrunk, while contingent and part-time faculty rolls have grown dramatically (Garcia, 2016; Weissmann, 2013). During the same period, faculty salaries have dropped as administrator salaries have risen (Flaherty, 2014). As a result, what was once a dependable, well-respected middle-class profession is now regularly scrutinized and challenged (Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, 2015). The increased speculation and oversight of collegiate instruction by governmental and accrediting agencies may have contributed to the emergence of the beleaguered college professor (Alexander, 2000; McLendon, et. al., 2006).

Further, the recent appearance of performance based funding of public

universities in some states has challenged the way many faculty execute their traditionally defined duties (Hicks, 2012; McLendon and Hearn, 2013). New regulations and assessment requirements are sometimes considered challenges to the ideas of academic freedom and independent curriculum development – principles traditionally cherished by tenured and tenure track faculty (Eaton, 2012; Enders, et. al., 2013). The job now comes with unique challenges - college students are now more financially insecure (Fry, 2015) and less mentally healthy than in the past (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2015 and 2016). Additionally, critics from outside of the academy have long questioned the role of faculty:

...faculty are the target of many poisoned arrows. Today one hears that faculty have abandoned students for their laboratories and carrels, that the time they should be spending teaching now goes into the writing of trivial articles no one reads, that they are cheating students by depriving them of a liberal education, and that they are only interested in teaching courses in their specialty (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995, p. 2)

If popular culture depictions of professors have worsened in recent years, such a trend correlates with public opinions about college professors – at least among some Americans. Recent Pew Research polls document a significant decline in attitudes toward colleges and universities among self-identified republicans, regardless of their academic experience. Democrats’ attitudes toward higher education increased steadily during the same period (Pew Research Center, 2017). Furthermore, republicans’ feelings on college professors were much “colder” than those of democrats, among all educational levels. (Fingerhut, 2017).

In addition to social and cultural pressures, recent technological advances have challenged the role of professors as providers of educational content, professional subject area experts, mentors, and public servants. Overall, the old instructional and tenure models appear to be in peril, and may begin to fade in an economic climate that values measurable outcomes and financial austerity over intellectual development (Kezar & Maxey, 2012, 2016).

If the public is indeed losing trust in the professoriate, and if college faculty members are under increased speculation from administrations, government officials, and regulatory bodies, then a study of cinematic representations of college professors is both timely and relevant. A comprehensive understanding of the shifting rhetoric around higher education should include the careful examination of influential social and cultural artifacts like films. As suggested by Hinton, despite the wishes of some observers, films are a part of the historical record of higher education in America. While popular motion pictures are not known for their reliable depiction of social reality, the sheer size of their audiences and their cultural ubiquity make them – like newspapers, television, theatre, and novels – contemporaneous repositories for popular discourse on a number of relevant social subjects. The debate surrounding a causal relationship between public opinion and mass mediated popular culture rages on, yet if films are considered historical artifacts, then they should be receive some consideration as essential pieces of a larger puzzle when examining social phenomenon. As James Combs asserts in *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship* (2013):

...movies are a part of history as valid evidence of the developing sensibilities of people, and may be studied as observable aesthetic artifacts of the unobservable

processes of attitude formation and change among populations, constituting the “climate of opinion” or “structure of feeling” characteristic of an age.” (p. 4).

The study of various popular representations of higher education as “observable,” historical artifacts is essential during a time of dramatic structural change. Realistic or not, these fictional narratives provide glimpses of the kinds of stories we are telling about each other and our real life institutions.

### **The Physical Professor**

While research on cinematic portrayals of college professors is increasing, literature that investigates how college professors perceive of their embodied and socially projected self – body, demeanor, attire - are rare. Blaikie (2011) published a study that investigates how individual clothing choice among male academicians reflects the extent to which they challenge or comply with the existing social structure of the university and how they assert a unique identity through wardrobe. Challenging the homogenous cinematic stereotypes of academicians, she documents a wide variety of decisions made by men when presenting themselves in the classroom – decisions informed by gender and self-identity. Similarly, Fisanick identifies the “normal professor body” as the same “white, male, able, heterosexual, and middle-class” (p. 326) body that dominates popular culture representations. She argues that idealized, stereotyped cinematic presentations of professor bodies are linked to “body bias” in academia, and that faculty must address the hegemony of the “normal body”. Gorham, et. al. (1999) found little connection between instructor attire and positive student perceptions, but Messner (2000) documents the disadvantages that race and gender can have on teaching evaluations and suggests that this may be due, in part, to student expectations of professor appearance and disposition.



He claims that female faculty are judged harshly by their students and colleagues for their choice of attire, and that women must balance their desire to project a professional appearance with social expectations of femininity. He also claims that the “embodied habitus” of white, male, masculine representations dominates all others, regardless of what the individual male professor chooses to wear. He calls the white, male professoriate to action:

We need to become aware of the ways that our embodied habitus serves largely conservative reproductive functions and then become conscious and active agents of change (p. 464).

Furthermore, Polan (1993) claims “professors are potentially able to take any object and make it an object of study. But they rarely have examined their own objectification” (p. 37). She examines the embodiment of the academic profession in mass media texts and encourages professors to “reflect upon their own embodiment” (p. 47).

...for many students, the teacher is not a conduit to knowledge that exists elsewhere: the teacher is an image, a cliché in the sense both of stereotype but also photographic imprinting that freezes knowledge in the seeming evidence of a look, where the image predetermines what the person means to us...The medium is the message, and the image of the professor often matters more than the ideas of the lesson. (Polan, 1993, p. 32)

If the real life image of the professor matters as much, if not more than the lesson, then college faculty should examine how their own embodiment and self-conception is shaped by a number of factors: their individual conceptions of the profession, their personal experiences as a student, and the projected images in films and popular media. An

investigation of his or her own college professor persona might begin with a consideration of two types of professors – the one on screen and the one reflected in public attitudes.

### **Interpretive Communities and Reception Studies**

When considering the cinematic representation of cultural figures such as college professors or social institutions such as higher education, one way to account for both the variability and homogeneity of the presentations is to consider the role of the viewer in their apprehension of the content. Allan Casebier, in *Film and Phenomenology: Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation* (1991), outlines the basic assumptions of Husserl's theory of artistic representation and applies it to film theory and audience reception. Rather than examining the relationship between the depicted art object and the physical subject it is meant to represent, Husserlian phenomenology investigates the *experience* of that art object: "it is relationship between experiences of certain sorts that is the source for the representation." (p. 11). Art objects, then, are not presented objectively – they are instead social constructions that depend upon "spectator imaginative activity governed by prevailing cultural and cinematic codes." (p. 35). The viewer is an indispensable factor in the creation of content, and his or her individual action (viewing the film) is informed by communal action (interpreting the film).

Consumers of popular culture are no different than consumers of other types of texts – they are heterogeneous and bring a number of different perspectives to the table. Yet, while they may consume the text while alone, their understanding of it depends upon their belonging to a certain social group, the cultural and temporal conditions that surround that group, and the degree to which they respond to the author's efforts to

encourage a specific interpretation or response. As suggested by Stanley Fish (1980), the reader is not an autonomous being. Fish claims that a social community produces the reader, and the reader in turn produces the meaning of the text. When readers confront texts, they interpret them from viewpoints that are learned and institutionalized. They make use of strategies that are shared by the group – what Fish called the *interpretive community*. Thus, this community constructs both the work of art and the interpretive reader. They are both “products of social and cultural patterns of thought.” (p. 332).

When we view a film and receive images about a cinematic character, we are predisposed – having been trained by our interpretive community – to view that character in a certain way. We use a certain “lens” to view the content. Our conception of that content is not purely subjective and does not belong only to us as individuals. Instead, it is created by the collective.

Becker (2007) makes a similar claim, stating that representing social reality (what he calls “telling about society”) depends upon an interpretive community of *makers* who create *standardized representations* for *users*. These makers will shape their representations in order to elicit a certain user response. Becker claims that these two groups adapt to each other in order to maintain a stable relationship, and that these adaptations allow for the efficient exchange of information about social reality. As both groups use standard elements to communicate, there is little room for misunderstanding and the exchange can be satisfying to all. However, like Fish, Becker claims that the degree to which one can construe a text depends upon the training received from one’s interpretive community:

We have all had some training, starting as young children, in construing such

objects, but we haven't all had training and experience with all kinds of representations. These abilities are distributed differentially along all kinds of lines of social division. (p. 55).

In some cases, the makers provide content that will be easily understood by wide audiences, like Hollywood movies. Most moviegoers will apprehend the content and follow the story effortlessly and without a second thought about the use of the particular cinematic language or thematic element. But some viewers watch with a more critical eye, and they may be very aware of the techniques the filmmaker is using to elicit a certain emotional response from the audience. The standardized language the filmmaker uses cannot account for the variations in training received through various interpretive communities, "these abilities are distributed differentially along all kinds of lines of social division." (p. 55). The separation between the makers and users (filmmakers and audience members, in this case) may be vast, and the communication between the two parties could come with a lot of interference. Additionally, relaying information about society may result in distortions and abstractions. These are the unavoidable artifacts that accompany reductive summaries and distillations of information. In film, as in a scientific paper, you can't tell everything, and you're bound to leave something out when you reduce data. Thus, construing and constructing texts is imperfect and perilous.

Becker stresses the importance of the communicative relationship between makers and users, "if the users don't do their part, the story doesn't get told, or doesn't get told as the story the makers intended." (p. 286). Further, the makers have to deal with restrictions within their native "professional and organizational environments" (p. 287), which can inhibit the breaking of new ground and the discovery of new innovations.

Becker admits that popular films are not sociological reporting, but that they do present data about society through representations of social reality. Additionally, storytellers always present heroes and villains, and in doing so they pick a side or take a stance – something that the archetypal research scientist ostensibly avoids.

In both fiction and nonfiction, the relationship between the “maker” and “beholder” relies upon a shared cultural understanding of certain codes that are transmitted over time:

When something stands for something to somebody, it does so by virtue of a kind of social agreement—“let us agree that this will stand for that”—which, once understood, need not be restated on every occasion. (Mitchell, 1995, p. 2).

The details of this social agreement, and what “stands for what” may change over time. Hans Jauss extended Fish’s interpretive communities construct in his theory of reception (1982). He not only emphasized the relationship between the reader and the text, but also the cultural reception of the artwork when it was released. He asserted that the impact of a particular text depended upon how it was received and how it endured over time. Further, he claimed that the interpretation of a text should not be separated from the specific, situational factors that influence the reader - such as the historical and cultural context. The relationship of the artwork to history and to the reader’s expectations determined its influence upon other texts and future audiences:

The interpretation of words, should, therefore focus not on the experience of an individual reader but on the history of a work’s reception and its relation to the changing aesthetic norms and sets of expectations that allow it to be read in different eras. (Culler, p.122).

Further, Jauss conceived of a “horizon of expectations,” for each set of readers – a temporally constrained paradigm that contained fairly rigid cultural assumptions and expectations. These “familiar norms” contributed to the understanding and popular reception of a text, influencing both the reader and the literary critic at the time of the text’s release. Jauss believed that these norms will change over time, and new additions to the literary corpus will permit modifications to certain genres and representations. As a result, new expectations will emerge. Therefore, the interpretation of a text will change over time, and will depend upon the shared conceptions of the community.

McGee (1990) makes a similar claim: readers assemble and reconfigure bits and pieces of older texts to provide meanings for current ones. The new interpretation depends upon *previously said* information that has been distributed throughout a social group. These shared narratives allow individual readers to both agree upon a shared meaning, and to create their own “divergent interpretations” (Aden, 1995). Similarly, Jensen (1987) views mass mediated texts, like films, as a way to “construct, rather than simply represent a particular version of social reality” (p. 23) according to the viewer’s “specific social and cultural background” (p. 30). He further states that media produce meaning according to a variable pattern – individuals may conceive of variable interpretations, but they follow patterns of use defined by political and social forces.

When viewing cinematic representations of college professors, the role of interpretive communities, culturally derived expectations, and historical contexts in the creation and reception of texts should be considered. Furthermore, the influence of previously released texts upon the generation and reception of current cinematic representations should be recognized. College professors, like members of any

profession, are not a homogenous group that can be easily reduced to a stereotype, and yet for decades, they have frequently been presented in such a way that reinforces popular conceptions of a certain “type.” While narrative films are fictionalized accounts of reality meant for entertainment, they present messages that are consumed by large audiences – messages that may have a significant impact on the attitudes and expectations of viewers. Since the 1920’s, mass communication researchers have sought to explain the influence of cinema on the public’s collective imagination, and constructs like *cultivation theory* have been both widely accepted and regularly contested (Gerbner, et. al., 2002; Tobolowsky and Reynolds, 2017a, 2017b). The extent to which these messages influence the common understanding of higher education by mass audiences is still debated, but an investigation of the experiences of currently employed film professors – as an interpretive community - may lead to a greater understanding of how professors respond to the differences between cinematic depictions of the professoriate and their own professional reality.

### **Research Questions**

To date, there is no published research on how college film professors respond to depictions of faculty in American films. This project will investigate a sample of film faculty in the U.S. and will be guided by the following questions:

1. How do higher education film faculty respond to on-screen depictions of college professors in leading roles?
2. To what extent do these depictions reflect their own experiences as college professors?
3. How do these portrayals correspond to their own conceptions of the professoriate

before they entered the field and since then?

### **Sample and Methodology**

Data collection consisted of thirteen IRB approved semi-structured interviews with film production and/or film studies faculty from a variety of higher education institutions located in various states, including Kentucky, Illinois, California, Hawaii, Iowa, Alabama, New York, and Pennsylvania. Volunteer subjects were recruited through an email request sent to all of the approximately 400 members of the University Film and Video Association (UFVA). In order to maintain a manageable sample size for a qualitative analysis, a total of fifteen participants were sought. When seventeen potential participants responded to the email request, 15 were randomly selected to participate by using an online random number generator. Respondents were assigned a number between 1-17, based on the time and day of their response, then the random number generator was used to choose the fifteen participants. After final selection, two participants dropped out, resulting in a final sample of thirteen. All participants currently teach film classes full-time at a college or university. The large majority holds graduate or terminal degrees in film studies and/or film production, including the Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.), and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in film production, screenwriting, film/cinema/media studies, film history, or a closely related discipline.

As a group, the participants have been teaching in higher education between 4-32 years for an average of 15.7 years. Of the ten men and three women, 46% are non-tenure track, and 54% are tenured or on tenure track. Seven of the subjects currently teach at a publicly funded institution and six at a private college or university (Table 2). Four of the subjects had a parent who was a college professor; two are first generation college



graduates. Eleven of them are white, and one is a self-identified ethnic minority (see Table 1). In order to determine how the sample compares to the demographic constitution of the UFVA, I requested demographic information from the UFVA. But, the organization was not able to provide it. Moreover, to my knowledge, there is no database that collects such information on working film professors nationwide. Thus, it is not known if this sample reflects the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic status, family background, or gender profile of film professors in the U.S., nor of those who belong to the UFVA.

While the sample is convenient for the project and depended upon the self-selection of subjects, it should not be considered a convenience sample as subjects were required to meet inclusion criteria such as belonging to the UFVA and currently teaching film at a college or university. Additionally, although the interview subjects exercised self-selection bias by volunteering to participate in the study, the sample selection was free of selection bias by the researcher as all UFVA participants were considered and final participants were selected randomly. The final sample size was limited by the amount of time that participants had to dedicate to the interviews, as well as the amount of time required for a detailed analysis of all interview responses.

Prior to the interviews, the participants were provided a list of “college professor films” (films that featured a college professor as a leading character from 1920-2016) for reference (see Appendix). All subjects responded to the same set of questions (see Appendix) and were interviewed for 30-60 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for use in the analysis. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study in order to assure anonymity and confidentiality.

Analysis of the interviews followed the best practices of qualitative content analysis as outlined by Creswell (2013), Glaser & Strauss (1968), and Strauss & Corbin (1990) and sought to uncover emerging patterns through a grounded theory approach to the data. Using the interview transcriptions, I reviewed all of the responses per the constant comparison method and identified a number of common thematic categories, based on how often various responders expressed similar concepts, thoughts, and personal reflections. I identified and marked relevant passages on the interview transcripts by hand, and catalogued recurrent responses in separate files. When a number of responses from various interviewees converged around a shared idea, observation, or concept, they were placed into a discrete category. These categories were then modified and refined through repeated consideration and continual comparison of the responses, and a number of themes emerged. When the final analysis was compared to the original responses, these themes proved to be quite durable.

As I began the analysis, it became necessary for me to reflect on the fact that I am a tenured professor with a Master of Fine Arts in film who teaches film production, aesthetics, history, and screenwriting and that my position may influence the work. As with many researchers who perform qualitative work, I strove to engage in the research from a self-reflexive position and to follow practices suggested by Creswell and others. As such, I disclose that my association with this particular group of respondents may have shaped both the collection and analysis of their responses.

This study focuses on a group of individuals who share particular professional experiences and characteristics. Together, they comprise a fairly homogenous sample. Unfortunately, these demographics are observed both in the film industry and in film

schools (Hawkins, 2007; Hunt, Ramon, and Tran, 2016; Kilday, 2017; Rose, 2014). Although there are some recent indications that film schools are accepting more women than in previous years, the number of women working in film is still very low, around 5-17% depending on job type (Lauzen, 2017; Ellis-Petersen, 2014). The subject sample used for this project contains a similarly small percentage of women at 16%. Ethnic and racial minorities are also underrepresented in the film industry and in film schools (Hawkins, 2007). This sample included one subject who identified herself as an ethnic minority, which accounts for 8% of the total number of respondents. In terms of race and gender, this small and convenient sample resembles the current composition of the film industry and appears to reflect the film education landscape as well.

### **Understanding Film Faculty**

Depending on the type of institution and the academic discipline, most college faculty members are expected to fulfill three basic types of work: teaching, research, and service. Teaching loads may vary by institution, college, department, academic rank, number of years in service, employment contract, and in some regions, union agreements. However, most faculty at a traditional research university are expected to teach 1-2 courses per semester. At a traditional state teaching institution or liberal arts college, instructors of most ranks are assigned 3-4 courses per semester with occasional opportunities for sabbatical or temporary “release time.” At any type of college or university, teaching faculty with additional administrative duties or posts may teach less. Additionally, nearly all instructors are expected to schedule and maintain office hours that allow students individual access to them, and on many campuses, faculty are assigned other duties like academic advising, recruiting, and fundraising. Service is

usually defined as voluntary work for internal and external agencies and organizations that are associated with the instructor's academic discipline. Departmental, college, and university committee assignments, or voluntary roles on external bodies like professional and academic organizations usually constitute service efforts. Depending on the institution, a good service record can be quite valuable for a professor seeking tenure or promotion.

Research requirements vary by intuition, college, and department as well, with research universities requiring more extensive published, peer-reviewed research than state universities and private liberal arts colleges. Perennial use of the hallowed saying "publish or perish" by academicians underscores the importance of formal scholarly research for college professors, and publications are universally required for tenure and promotion to a higher academic rank. One common public perception is that once tenured or promoted to "full professor" however, requirements for academic productivity diminish - hence, the popular conception that tenured college professors are shiftless and "burned out." However, the published research suggests that faculty productivity may not be directly tied to rank or tenure, and depends upon a number of other factors like institutional type, external funding resources, academic discipline, previous productivity, and individual differences (Over, 1982; Bentley, 1990; Bentley & Blackburn, 1990; Wanner, Lewis, & Gregorio, 1981).

Publication productivity marks the traditional research track for faculty with Ph.D.'s who are eligible for tenure. Requirements are slightly different for film professors and other arts-related faculty who possess a Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) or Master of Arts (M.A.) [the M.A. is not accepted as a terminal degree, but some M.A.'s

have been granted tenure]. Instead of requiring M.F.A.'s to publish academic papers in scholarly peer-reviewed publications or books, most are expected to produce artwork that is peer-reviewed or "refereed" by a group of subject area experts. For M.F.A. film faculty, this can include the selection of one of their films or moving image works into a peer-reviewed local, regional, national, or international film festival, television show, online exhibition, or other showcase or venue. For many screenwriting and filmmaking professors, peer-review of their work also includes selling a script or film to a production company, producer, director or distributor that will produce or distribute the film to a general audience. For screenwriters, peer-review can also mean having a script win an award or recognition in a screenwriting contest.

Therefore, many M.F.A. film professors spend summers and holiday breaks either writing, producing, editing, or promoting their films, which enables them to maintain contact with the professional world while collaborating with other faculty members, filmmakers, and students. However, Ph.D. film instructors rarely teach film production, but rather film history, film criticism, film studies, film aesthetics and theory, or rhetoric (some M.F.A. professors will teach some or all of these subjects as well). In short, faculty who call themselves film professors can be a diverse group in terms of degrees and practices, but they are usually recognized as scholars and/or practitioners of cinema who are well versed in the theoretical, commercial, and technical aspects of the industry by their home institutions. For this project, it is important to acknowledge that the film faculty respondents provide a unique perspective when discussing professor representations on film. Their formal training and professional experiences predispose them to view films as industry insiders and scholars, and their readings of these mediated

texts will differ significantly from faculty from other academic disciplines, as well as viewers in the general public.

## **Findings**

Upon analysis of the interviews, three major topics emerged: on-screen portrayals, depictions and reality, and personal experiences. First, respondents discussed the types of on-screen portrayals of college professors at length – both negative and positive – and how those depictions have changed over the years. Second, respondents compared the cinematic depictions of professors to their own experiences as students, and discussed why negative portrayals and stereotypes have endured on screen. Third, respondents discussed how they chose the profession, what influenced them to do so, and what shaped their conceptions of the professoriate. They also relayed their own experiences as college professors and how these compare to cinematic depictions and cultural stereotypes.

### **I. On-screen Portrayals**

#### **Negative Projections**

All of the respondents spoke at length about the negative depictions of college professors in film, saying that they are sometimes portrayed as ineffectual, out of touch, weak, angry, bitter, snobs, uptight, goofy, pretentious, or sad. A number of these characterizations resemble the popular culture stereotypes discussed in the existing literature (Conklin 2008, Umphlett, 1984 ), and suggest a general disrespect for a profession that values academic instruction over the production of commercial goods. Jim, a tenure-track professor at a private institution, posits two basic types of negative depictions: “[These] characters are either too smart for their own good or they're not happy with their career as an academic, yet they don't pursue their bigger dream or their

bigger career. So they're kind of stuck as academics.” The implicit suggestion of being “stuck” in a kind of *meta-career* suggests the oft misinterpreted maxim of “those who can’t, teach,” and further imparts an “otherness” to the college professor – one who stands on the outside of conventional life, and doesn’t do “real work.” Jim further describes the purported alienation of the public academic in these images: “there's a kind of snobbishness sometimes. It's hard for them to relate and hard to be sympathetic.” Similarly, Samantha – a non-tenure track instructor with over 20 years of professional experience in the film industry - points to a “coldness” in cinematic professor characters and Kurt – a tenured veteran professor with 32 years in higher education - says that they’re often seen as an “uptight kind of know-it-all” who gets punished in the end by their fun-loving students. This is reflected in many college films, where the students are the “heroes.”

Ralph, a longtime tenured instructor at a mid-sized public university, laments the lack of positive professor characters throughout history, claiming that they’re depicted as “weird,” “dysfunctional,” “alcoholics,” and poor. Albert, a non tenure-track instructor at a private institution, claims that even when the professor character may be the hero of the story, they tend to display a number of negative behaviors, like being “incredibly pretentious,” “self-unaware,” “nosy,” and a “know-it-all.” Several respondents noted that these characters are portrayed as snobs and elites. According to Cody, a tenure track professor with extensive professional experience in film production, cinematic professors tend to reside at a “prestigious institution with ivy on the wall,” rather than a “rural community college.” The tendency to invite more contempt for professors at elite institutions than for their colleagues in less glamorous posts may reflect a combination of

American anti-intellectualism and populism – two forces may contribute to the *othering* of the professor (Moore, 2017).

The otherness of the stereotypical cinematic college professor can extend to their appearance as well. According to Kurt, filmmakers often use wardrobe, props and makeup to depict the embodiment of the alienated intellectual:

It's a classic case of, you know, putting the horn-rimmed glasses with tape on it for the nerd, and a pocket protector, right?...So let's make the guy cynical, wearing tweed with the patches on the shoulder, right? Kind of disheveled, wrinkled, hair a mess, you know, kind of looking like he's a little out of his mind.

Both Jim and Norman – a tenure-track professor at a private university - commented on the physical dimensions of these depictions. Jim observed that the cinematic professor might “have a certain look, like wearing the jacket and a beard,” while Norman says they might look “pale and weak” after spending “a lot of time indoors.” According to Cody, the filmic professor might be “some guy with pocket protectors and glasses, who has trouble formulating a sentence, but just read and write really well.” The extent to which filmmakers depend upon these stereotypical embodiments in the creation of their narratives and the transmission of their messages will be discussed later. However, these physical depictions may further suggest the tendency of the academic to occupy a dubious space in American society – one that does not easily fit into the occupational structure. In some respects, the college professor is neither a white collar nor blue-collar profession. Yet, like traditional representations of other workers and professionals – police, firefighters, lawyers, bankers, doctors – cinematic college professors have been overwhelmingly white and male for the past several decades.



A number of the respondents discussed the propensity for the portrayals of professors to be male. This reflects predominant trends in American films. The large majority of leading characters are male, and have been since the 1920's. Additionally, film crews are disproportionately male, and the flagship professional honorary organization for the industry – the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences - is overwhelmingly white and male (members are selected by a board of governors). However, the real-life professoriate – despite a long history of white, male dominance - is now more diverse. According to a National Center for Education Statistics 2013 report, 43% of all U.S. college professors in all disciplines and all ranks are white males, and 35% are white females (NCES). While there has been a recent increase in fulltime female instructors of all ranks, women are still paid and promoted less than their male counterparts (Higher Ed Spotlight, 2016). Similarly, while there have been more female leading roles in high profile or award-winning recent professor films like *Still Alice* (2014), *Arrival* (2016), and *Larry Crowne* (2011), cinematic professors still fit an unrealistic profile – straight, white, male, mid-40's.

Samantha, Albert, and Caroline - a tenure track professor at a large public university - noted the lack of female depictions of professors on film, as well as an obvious dearth of female directors. Samantha said that most college films do not reflect real-life demographics. In her experience:

...a large chunk of the people that I work with [are female]. In my department I think we have two men and seven women. Most departments seem very similar to that...whether it's [a] television [department]...a cinema studies place, or whether it's a history department.

Caroline argues that this lack of diversity results in more cinematic stereotypes – some of which can be extremely negative. For example, Norman pointed to *The Squid and the Whale* (2005) character as an emblematic embodiment of the prototypical white, male professor, “I definitely think that the depiction in Squid and the Whale was...very much about the egotistical male professor, and probably not even from a particular era, just an egotistical male professor reveling in that authority.” Negative stereotypical images of the privileged white, male professor may in fact reflect tension between a fantasy cinematic world and true life, especially when those depictions may be worsening.

**Becoming more negative?** Some respondents noted that negative depictions have become more common over the last couple of decades. Kurt discussed this change, citing some high profile college professor films:

...that shift. I remember there was that one in law school, where he's like the all-knowing guy that everybody respects [*The Paper Chase*, 1973], and then you had Indiana Jones. And now it's...The way I see it is that there's a lot of anger underneath the surface of these characters...it's kind of like unfulfilled dreams, and therefore they're taking it out on...their students, at their profession. They're very cynical, right?...They're not happy with anything, they're just very miserable.

They're lazy. And you know, it's disheartening, to be honest with you.

Similarly, Cody finds more recent narratives on college professors to be “little bit more negative “ than in the past. Ralph agrees, referring back to the Pre-war days of Hollywood:

It seems to me like in the years before...like back in the studio years, the depiction wasn't nearly as negative...[academia] was just a different kind of

society but it wasn't necessarily weird or bad until I think that when we get to things like [*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*].

While Cody, Ralph, and Kurt argue that the depictions are darkening, Dennis and Caroline – both tenured professors at state universities - reject the idea that professor roles are becoming more negative in isolation. They point to a greater trend, and suggest that dramatic storytelling has become both more negative and more nuanced in general.

Dennis sees this tendency as a recent development:

I don't find [college professor depictions] to be more negative or positive relative to the rest of media. I think in general if you look at the media of now versus the '90s...our media has gone darker and there's more complexity and more gray, and darker gray...I think it follows a trend of overall media creation right now.

Caroline echoes this assessment, and suggests that the tone of dramatic narratives on the small and large screen may be reflecting or fueling public emotions:

Actually what I'm seeing, just media in general, a lot of the new films...they're darker, in general. They have a lot more anxiety, and [they're] more ambiguous. There's no real good guy, bad guy, kind of thing, anymore. [There are] more layers of complexity, which makes people more anxious. It's easier to navigate in the world, when you know what's good, and what's bad. Now, it's not presented that way anymore.

A trend such as this could reflect a return to the aesthetic of the 1970's *New American Film movement*, when dark, morally ambiguous plots and anti-heroic characters filled films designed to attract young baby boomers to a beleaguered film industry. Since then, relaxed content controls, changing demographics and cultural expectations have made

new types of narratives not only possible, but profitable. Moreover, internet digital delivery and the growth of cable and in-home satellite services have broadened the kind of content consumers demand. Another explanation for darker content across the board may lie in the geopolitical environment. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City, the United States has been continually involved in worldwide conflict, including morally troubling behavior such as alleged state-sponsored torture, surveillance of its own citizens, drone strikes, and threats of conflict with nuclear states. Increasing public anxiety and distrust of social institutions may be contributing to darker presentations of cinematic characters and themes – not just of professors.

While most respondents confirmed that American films contain negative portrayals of college professors, some argued that positive depictions are also in the mix. Albert, a young non-tenure track instructor at a private university, said that he can argue that cinematic professors have become more “villainous, immoral, and unethical” over the years, but he claims that he could also make a case for both increasingly optimistic presentations, and increased gender diversity in recent titles:

*Arrival* and *Still Alice*: they are females and are very empowered...have a tremendous amount of responsibility...and are presented as...intelligent, sharp, very bright people that undergo a tremendous amount of emotional stress, and they make it through the other side. There are some positives here...positive representations of the position as being one of strength and of positivity for their constituents, for their audience, for their students.

Likewise, Jim and Norman claim that the representations run the gamut, constituting a mix of positive and negative images – sometimes within the same film. Cody presents

*Good Will Hunting* (1997) as a prime example of varied representations. This film presents the story of a young, troubled, working class man, Will, who is also an unknown mathematical genius. Will's talent is discovered by the famous mathematician, Professor Lambeau, and he is later mentored by community college instructor and counselor, Sean Maguire. According to Cody, the Robin Williams character, Maguire, is keen to "change a student's outlook, or empower the student's knowledge to change their own lives," but the Lambeau character is "more about feeding his own ego." Norman expresses a strikingly similar assessment:

Where [Lambeau] is portrayed as the stodgy academic with a huge ego...[he also] sees the potential in this young man, and the mentor [Maguire]...has more soul to him, feeling more empathy, actually more the feminine. That really brings the best out of this young man [Will].

Samantha also found portrayals that mix the positive and negative, and cites a comedy film about a group of hapless college professors who start their own ghost hunting service, *Ghostbusters*, as a prime example:

The Ghostbusters were goofballs and Bill Murray [Professor Venkman] is using the job for money and...lifestyle and doesn't really care about what he's doing. So it's negative in the midst of all the funny Dan Aykroyd [Professor Raymond "Ray" Stantz] stuff.

### **Types of Portrayals**

As some respondents found both positive and negative examples, others made distinctions between the types of negative depictions, claiming that some are clear indictments of the academic profession, while others are portrayals of inherently negative

characters. Norman argues that the latter characters are villainous antagonists, despite their chosen occupation. For example, he, Krista and Eric cite the leading character in *The Squid and the Whale* – a film that features a writing professor who alienates his children as he and his wife divorce - as being a jerk “who happened to be a college professor.” In other cases, respondents cited the tendency for some representations to demean the profession, and its inhabitants as being “out of touch,” or “ineffectual.” Moreover, some respondents made a further distinction between villainous characters and those who are benignly labeled as misfits. Ralph describes these negative, but harmless misfit depictions as being “not necessarily evil, or anything like that but boring, too abstract and totally out of touch with the real world.” He says that oftentimes, these professors are seen as “useless” and “silly,” and unable to make an observable contribution to society.

Some respondents noted the tension between those cinematic instructors who ostensibly make such a social contribution and those who do not. Frequently, professors on film who work as researchers or scientists contribute information and expertise that allows the city, nation, or world to be saved from some threat. These researcher-heroes have made regular appearances in science fiction, action, and fantasy films. At other times, they are the villains, using their esoteric knowledge to either make a profit or advance their own misguided agenda. But, often the researcher types stand in stark contrast to the teacher types, who are alternately portrayed as inspirational, depraved, or ineffective. Norman commented on the two types of filmic professors by comparing the theater professor in *The Savages* (2007) with Professor Lambeau’s mathematics professor in *Good Will Hunting*:

[It's] not a negative portrayal of a faculty member [*The Savages*]...but rather it simply depicts faculty as ineffectual...Humanities faculty are simply not talking about anything significant...the intellectual work doesn't matter in some way.

You can then set this against something like...*Good Will Hunting* where you have the ambition of the faculty member, the narcissism of the faculty member, but it's in a field where everybody recognizes that there's some application, that there's some real significance to what high level theoretical mathematicians might do.

Similarly, Jim delineates between the success of the professor who applies his discipline in a useful, fantastic, heroic way, and the less respected classroom-bound characters:

...generally a college professor is supposed to be an expert in their field, like in the Dan Brown movie...*Inferno* [2016] and *Da Vinci Code* [2006]. Other times they seem like they're professors because they're not totally satisfied with their life or something like that.

However, Stuart – a veteran instructor at a private college - sees some of these fantasies as positive for the profession, lending popular credibility to the intellectual archetype and bridging the gap between the life of the mind and the life of the body:

With [*Raiders of the Lost Ark*] you get the college professor as hero. The geek who makes anthropology or archeology attractive [and] interesting. The complex science of archeology and hunting for the past as a stimulating, even attractive thing.

Similarly, Samantha discussed these remarkable images of the adventuring professor and suggests that Indiana Jones' ability to both obtain recognition as an expert in his field, and “operate outside of his small area of specialty” is “beautiful.”

## Positive Depictions

While the majority of respondents reported a number of negative cinematic depictions of college professors, several of them cited positive portrayals. In fact, both Norman and Krista expressed difficulty in recalling widespread depictions that were critical of the profession as a whole, and Krista argued that the only negative portrayals she knew were contained in “slapstick” college comedies where the professors are used as comedic foils. Similarly, Eric – a new tenure track professor at a public institution - believed that many of the more recent examples were fairly positive:

Actually, I felt like [the depictions are] fairly honest. They're fairly accurate in that they're fairly well intended individuals who are struggling in a complex workplace. Particularly, *Arrival*, I thought was... actually kind to the profession.

The woman was portrayed as being an expert in her field and obviously seemed to have a lecture prepared for her students.

Similarly, Dennis views many of these cinematic professors as “flawed heroes” who are “trying to make the world a better place. Touted for intellect, touted for reasoning, touted for empathy.” Albert said such fictional characters have inspired him, and that he wants to emulate their sincere concern for the future of their students. Citing *Good Will Hunting* as one example, Krista - a long-time college professor at public university - called these characters “quintessential great professors” who mentor young people through a coming of age process that benefits the student and society in general. For example, she sees Dustin Hoffman’s professor character in *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) as a positive on-screen academic – one who is interested in the intellectual process of discovery. In this film, Hoffman plays literature professor Jules Hilbert, who helps the main character



accept his own unusual, forthcoming death. Like Krista, Kurt also finds positivity in well-known professor characters like John Houseman's Professor Charles W. Kingsfield, Jr. in *The Paper Chase*, calling them venerable intellectuals. Overall, several respondents observed that many professor characters were consistently and positively portrayed as experts in their field, even when the plot of the film has them pursuing another endeavor.

## **II: Depictions and Reality**

### **Why So Negative?**

In addition to identifying negative portrayals of college professors in films, respondents also discussed the possible causes of this tendency. Four key factors emerged from the responses. First, narrative films require conflict in order to drive a successful narrative. Second, depictions need to be simplified in order to conform to the cinematic form and thus can rely on inaccurate stereotypes. Third, the increasing numbers of Americans attending college create both a wide public audience familiar with higher education, and more filmmakers and screenwriters who have first-hand experiences in college. Fourth, college professors make for interesting characters by virtue of their work and working conditions.

**Movies need conflict.** Several respondents discussed the need for conflict in any dramatic film, citing it as an essential ingredient in the construction of a plot that will resonate with viewers. Cody summarizes many of the responses when he states “without conflict there's probably not a story worth telling.” He asserts that the film must have a lead character that the viewer wants to follow throughout the entire film, and that the best way to do that is to create an interesting character who has personal flaws that are exposed through dramatic conflict. Similarly, Eric argues that films “tend to be based on

conflict. They tend to be based on a hero that has to take action,” and according to Stuart, conflict that emerges when the protagonist takes action yields an emotionally satisfying journey for the audience: “We can't have a movie about mathematics in college. You need an emotional journey. The emotional journey is really what it's all about.” Not only do films need human-like protagonists with personal shortcomings that they must transcend in order to navigate the conflicted journey, they also need an antagonist. As Jim says: “I think in any story, most of the time, there's got to be somebody who's an antagonistic force...So somebody's got to be the bad guy.” Sometimes, this “bad guy” is a college professor. In short, respondents argued that if the college professor character is the protagonist, then it is necessary that she carry flaws, shortcomings, or peccadillos with her as she confronts difficulty. However, if she is the antagonist, then she will necessarily possess a number of negative characteristics, as the antagonist is usually the rival or villain in the story. Either way, a story about a college professor is likely to be negative in some way, as it's necessary for the dramatic narrative.

Several respondents maintained that, beyond their essential need for negative characteristics, characters, and settings, films cannot provide verisimilitude. They are not accurate depictions of the real world by their very nature. Instead, they are highly stylized versions of reality, and as such, their characters are unreliable representations of professors, or members of any other profession. As Eric states, films are “a great simplification of life. Life spools out at a much slower pace than movies. We can't cut from one moment to the next. Life is conflicted. Life is...more complex, I think, than film stories.” Dennis echoed this idea, stating that no matter how realistic the production is meant to be, films are “a fantasy world, still.” This fantasy world, according to Eric,

must be over-simplified for a number of reasons. First, it must exist in a form that is easily accepted and understood by the audience member, and second, it must be streamlined in order to resonate with the viewer, which will then make for a more successful product:

We absorb only the most simplistic. We absorb only the most dramatic. How are college professors portrayed? They're portrayed really simply in movies because that's how movies portray everything. It's very difficult to find a movie that's as deep and complex as real life...Any time that you have drama...any time you have a story that can be dumbed down or can be made two dimensional...that's going to give you a more powerful movie. That's going to...maybe get your film scheduled at a film festival, maybe get you distribution.

### **Imaging the Work**

Jim argues that, unlike other professions, academic work is not inherently cinematic and can be difficult to portray: “It might be hard to sustain a real audience if the movie was about that professor's academic career. I think most of the time it's pretty dull or it's hard to be visual with it.” Eric echoes this sentiment, pointing to the complex and arcane reality of the academic workload: “A college professor, they're trying to do their service. They're trying to do their research. They're trying to be a good teacher to students. That in itself is a crappy screenplay.” As such, he is not surprised that movies about college professors are not very realistic or accurate:

Of course movies are going to get it wrong. The life of the college professor doesn't make for a good movie because it's a complex, messy job. Not only that, it's a...really intellectual job where you're dealing with ideas. You're dealing with

society. You're dealing with deep complex thoughts that need to be peer reviewed and need to be argued out. Again, that doesn't really make for the best movie where you've got a fairly simple conflict and someone dealing with fairly broad things that speaks to broad audience.

At times, stereotypes can provide quick assimilation of these “broad” issues for “broad” audiences. A number of respondents discussed the use of stereotypes as a way of simplifying the story and characters in order to connect more immediately with the audience. Norman commented on this propensity among storytellers who operate under the severe time limitations and financial demands of a motion picture:

They want shorthand reference to things that people have a sense of because they don't want to spend a lot of time creating new conceptions that people can invest their belief in. [So they use] the absent-minded professor, the nutty professor, the mad scientist, or the ancient lore expert, something along those lines.

Kurt laments the continual use of outdated stereotypes by screenwriters, calling it “lazy,” “easy, cheap, fast,” and a “crutch.” He also criticized contemporary film producers and film industry executives for their reliance on stock characterizations: “the way they do production now, everything is fast and done, these scripts pop out, they go right to the stereotypes all the time...it's not just college professors, it's really everybody.” Some respondents, like Samantha, said they were concerned that negative stereotypes of the lazy, cynical, and lecherous academic may affect the public view of real-life college professors, who are often just “normal people” trying to navigate their family and work lives. Cody spoke about his experiences as a child raised in an academic community, where his parents, neighbors, teachers, and friends’ parents did not resemble many of the

on-screen stereotypical professors. Similarly, Ralph – who has taught in a number of settings in the U.S. and abroad - maintained that the cinematic accounts are more dramatic than the reality:

When it comes to the [onscreen] drinking and the carousing...it makes us [college professors] look a lot more interesting...the part about being sexual predators...I think that happens in real life unfortunately, but most people I know who teach are just like reasonably normal people. They tend to be more liberal than the average person and a little bit more open to stuff, but they're not weird.

### **More People Going to College**

In explaining both the increase in cinematic college professor portrayals and the negativity of those depictions, some respondents noted recent changes to societal expectations and college education. Respondents suggested that as getting a four-year college degree is a nearly ubiquitous experience for most members of the American middle and upper classes, both filmmakers and audiences are becoming comfortable with students and instructors on screen. Norman spoke about how depictions of university life differ from depictions of other social institutions:

A lot of Americans expect or wind up going to college, so it's this institution that...so many people have some kind of personal connection to or personal experience with...there are actually relatively few Americans who have actual some kind of personal experience or knowledge of the military. You [the filmmaker] can do whatever the hell you want, with regard to the military, in popular media because there are very few people [in the audience] who actually

know what's going on... With college there's this whole sense of, 'Okay, people are going to have some experience with that.'

Albert also said that increasing portrayals of professors and higher education reflects the predominant assumption that "we've all been in a college classroom, and we had experiences, both positive and negative, with college professors." Samantha said that these new depictions might reflect first-hand knowledge:

I think [the number of college professor film depictions] is growing, I think maybe that's because more writers and [audience] members have had a college education. So they're coming in with their own ideas, they don't only have the ideas formed by previous films.

However, Norman suggests that any increase in negative cinematic portrayals may be linked to two relatively new realities faced by young Americans - the need for a college degree and the escalating associated costs:

The culture makes college compulsory, economically. At the very same time...other factors have made college stupid expensive and required leveraging your future in order to get [a degree]...I think that you have to be there [in college], rather than your choosing to be there, makes it easier to depict faculty as those authority figures who stand in your way.

Cody and Eric also observed that college faculty are often seen as bureaucratic authorities - "gatekeepers" and "judges" who ultimately decide whether or not a student is successful. Furthermore, these judges could cost students thousands of additional dollars by delaying or prohibiting their completion of the degree. As Eric said, "they're powerful characters."

## Interesting Characters

Not only are college professors powerful characters, they're apparently also interesting to filmmakers, screenwriters, and audiences. Respondents claimed that college professors are appealing as key characters for a number of reasons. Stuart said that the university and its host of experts provide a number of storytelling opportunities:

...writing a part for a college professor type role. Why would you do that? Well, it's because unlike accountants and plumbers, college professors can cover just about any topic or subject under the sun. You can have biologists, novelists, engineers... You can have the arts, the humanities... You can impart... or employ sciences in rather broad but maybe resonating strokes.

Samantha called these subject matter experts "superheroes." She claimed that like their caped cousins in superhero movies, college professors have great talent, but are human enough to exhibit the kind of flaws necessary for an interesting character development. Additionally, she said that college professors are usually regarded as intelligent people and that audiences "like smart characters... to be able to spend your time with really smart people who say really smart things is fun." Other respondents agreed that, in addition to saying smart things, expert/teachers also make broad and complex concepts accessible to the general public. Since many films require intelligent characters for exposition, there will always be a need for professors. Albert asserts that audiences need someone to explain things to them once and a while, and that professors can be a source of "wisdom and information" for both the onscreen characters and the viewer. Likewise, Cody sees the academician as essential for films that feature a "big reveal," when a character elucidates the problem, or solution that has escaped the others. Similar to Samantha,

Cody suggests that not only is it fun to be around smart people, but that we all have the desire to be the “smartest person in the room,” and we can vicariously identify with that character in the film.

Beyond being intelligent, Norman says that the college professor is also an effective researcher and investigator, akin to the dogged detective archetype featured in so many classic Hollywood films. They are “a good detective who is not a detective,” someone who thinks critically and can use their brainpower to solve puzzles that have not been solved by less intellectual methods. Moreover, Eric makes the case that the professor character is an attractive one for filmmakers because she plays an influential role in real life:

I think it's a powerful position in society...We're talking to the young people and we're writing research that gets read. We're on the cutting edge of intellect, of thought, of society...It's important...who else out there has a job where they get to sit there and talk to 500 people every day and test them on what they've been told and give them grades, grade them and test them and lecture to them? That's a powerful job.

Many of these responses may indicate the respondents' own ideas of how they would like audiences and students to conceive of them and their work. They may also reflect an inherent propensity to imagine how they – as film practitioners - would integrate college professor characters into their own films.

### **Public Perceptions are Negative**

When asked about perceptions of college professors and academia among the general public, some respondents said that the prevailing views are negative. Some of



these perceived attitudes resemble popular culture stereotypes discussed earlier. For example, Eric said that many people do not think that professors do a good job of teaching students, and that they are seen as “wrong-headed,” while Ralph claims that people think that they teach “useless stuff.” Yet, other conceptions are difficult to find in films. For example, the effete, socialistic radical instructor does not appear often in mainstream motion pictures, but some respondents suggested that this image is common in American political discourse. Kurt has heard some chastise professors for advocating a certain political point of view from the safety of the ivory tower:

I think that the profession is seen as...they're a bunch of liberal crybabies that have never worked in the real [world]...they can only relate to kids, and they indoctrinate, they don't teach. And so therefore, they're bad...we're all a bunch of people that couldn't make it in the real world and we cozied up to academia where we have tenure and there's no expectations on us...I think people look at [academia] as a soft landing for people who couldn't make it in the real world.

Similarly, Samantha maintains that professors are viewed as out-of-touch, arrogant liberal arbiters of useless information, and that academia itself is to blame.

So maybe that idea rubbed off on a generation of people that if you go to college you become arrogant and overly confident and you aren't a very nice person anymore...you have no people skills, no real world skills anymore, because you've lived in academia, you've lived in the ivy covered buildings.

Samantha also says that the image of the overpaid professor has endured over the years, despite the recent economic difficulties in higher education in many states. Ralph agrees, saying that the “common misconception that we make tons and tons of money” is

completely inaccurate. Moreover, Stuart suggests that the idea of the elite, well-paid, well-respected intellectual may be a vestigial phenomenon in the current academic environment:

I think the image of the professor used to be in the 1950s, 1960s...perhaps a cardigan-wearing pipe-smoking bookish kind of white guy in their '30s or '40s. And today it's just become this unbelievably different job...[now] there are big conversations nationally about how adjunct professors are treated and what rights do they have

Kurt, Cody, and Caroline assert similar ideas about the current state of the profession, and how it differs from popular public conceptions. They both asserted that being a college professor is more difficult than it was in the past, with more demands from a number of different stakeholders, and they did not expect the pay or working conditions to improve in the near future. Despite these worsening conditions, most of the respondents seemed eager to discuss how they chose the profession, and how it chose them.

### **III: Personal Experiences, Stereotypes, and the Profession**

#### **Early Experiences and Attitudes**

As filmmakers, film instructors, and film scholars, the respondents constitute a unique interpretive community that may respond to cinematic texts about their own profession with a certain amount of coherence. In order to examine how the member's conceptions of the professoriate may have developed over time, it may be useful to explore their singular personal experiences. Their individual views of the professoriate and academia may have been significantly shaped by first-hand experiences with real life

academicians at many stages of their lives. As children, students, teaching assistants, and faculty members, these film professors have had many points of contact with real-life academicians, as well as “inside knowledge” of academia. As explored in earlier sections of this manuscript, they’ve also had many points of contact with fictionalized, mass mediated professors. Moreover, they’ve received culturally conditioned messages about the role and image of the professor as a social player in their homes, and through their family, friends, communities, and cultures. The intersections of these three basic types of experiences – direct, mediated, and socially constructed – may have affected how they apprehended, processed, and conceptualized of these films in the past and present.

All of the respondents were asked to assess their experiences as college professors, discuss how those experiences compare to popular stereotypes of the profession, their decision to enter the profession, and the extent to which they were influenced by depictions of academia in mass media. Many were drawn to the profession by positive experiences in school or college, or through contact with a professor/teacher mentor figure. Some had parents who were school teachers or college professors, and said that their family experiences directly influenced their conceptions of professors and higher education. For Cody, the introduction to college was very early. Both of Cody’s parents were college professors, and growing up in a large university town provided him with regular exposure to professors. Not only did his parents work in higher education, but also his friends’ parents, the coaches on his athletic teams, and his neighbors. He said that he always viewed them as working adults first, and college professors second. Stuart was also heavily influenced by higher education at a young age. Raised by a professor mother and researcher father, he grew up in a city that hosted some famous college

campuses, and said that he felt like he was always a part of higher education. His ex-wife is a currently a teacher, as is one of his children. Kurt also had two college professor parents, and although he initially resisted going into the “family business,” he respected the profession immensely until he started graduate school:

There, [during] my graduate years, those professors were the burned-out guys that wanted to see everybody fail, and they told you exactly what you already knew, all the mistake[s] you made...So, if anything, that turned me off from the profession of teaching, because I said if I ever taught I would teach the exact opposite of the way these people do it.

After graduating, he worked in the film industry for several years before becoming a tenured professor, and then a university administrator. Although Eric’s grandfather was the first person in his family to go to college, his mother is a teacher and his father is a life-long professor. From an early age, he saw education as a desirable profession: “There was a current in my family that...education is cool. Learning is cool. Working and learning is cool...It was a way of not only working for a living but also giving for a living, being a good citizen.” Dennis said he always knew he was going to be a college professor. His father never taught, but he established a career as a chemist after college. Dennis thought he too would be a scientist, but he eventually went to graduate school for film and multimedia. Ralph’s mother graduated from college and his father earned a master’s degree, but he primarily viewed college as a way to experience the things that his fundamentalist Christian parents did not allow. After his own graduation, he left a highly paid professional position to go to graduate school so he could teach at the collegiate level. Samantha and Caroline were both first generation college students, and

both of their mothers encouraged them to pursue a college degree when they were very young.

Despite a variety of backgrounds, the respondents' decision to pursue a career in academia was significantly influenced by familial attitudes toward higher education. Popular culture representations of college life were less influential, however some respondents said that films and other kinds of mass media shaped their views about higher education and professors. Samantha said she was intrigued by the scenes of students listening to the instructor teach in *The Paper Chase*. Similarly, Cody and Norman said that the *Indiana Jones* films captivated their imagination, and led them to become more interested in teaching. The dashing image of Indy convinced them that professors don't have to be "boring," and that the profession may even lead to adventure and discovery. Eric says that he'd still like to fly around the world like Indiana Jones, but that the reality of higher education is "messier than that."

For some of the respondents, their positive personal experiences with higher education as children and as college students influenced their conceptions of college professors and the academic profession. These experiences may have led them to hold certain expectations and conjured an idealized professor type that mirrored the real-life educators in their homes, communities and campuses. Furthermore, such positive and formative ideations may have predisposed them to view both real-life and cinematic professors through a certain lens – one that might constitute a nascent interpretive community.

## Real-Life Experiences and Stereotypes

When considering how their real experiences compare to cinematic depictions of the professoriate, many respondents recalled a variety of popular stereotypes such as the arrogant, absent-minded, lecherous, drunken, out-of-touch, or inspiring, mentoring professor. However, encountering real-life examples of the “bad professor” was rare. Caroline has taught at the college level in two states over 15 years, and she’s worked alongside a number of professors: “I see all those stereotypes...especially when you're dealing with tenure...you have these professors that have been here for decades...I still see professors in tweed jackets...You have some absent-minded professors. You still have inspiring professors.” Albert is in the early phase of his academic career, but he says he has witnessed a number of stereotypical professor types, like “the full nerd guy,” “the tenured guy that’s been there since the 1970’s,” and the “matronly” documentary teacher. Ralph, who has worked as a professor for almost thirty years, has only known one instructor who was terminated for drinking, and that was for being intoxicated in the classroom. Kurt has witnessed some of the more negative behaviors, but doubts that they’re much worse than in other professions:

I've known some professors that had [alcohol problems], but it's never been out of control. I know a guy at NYU was a drunk. He had kept a bottle in his drawer. I knew that, because you had to hit him early in the day or forget it...and you know, there's also professors that sleep around with students...And another one that was sexually harassing another [professor] that I had to fire...But if you look at the big...macrocosm...there are accountants that are doing that. There are politicians

that are doing that. So do we say that it's more or less [in academia]? Does it happen? Yes.

Krista also recalls a sexually aggressive but well-respected professor (“a lecher”) from her undergraduate experience, and early in his career, Albert is concerned that these stereotypes might affect his reputation, “I worried about my relationship where even my connection to other young people could be perceived in a sexual way or something. It sometimes keeps me very guarded.” But, on the whole, most of respondents did not report many encounters with negative stereotypes embodied in real life professors, and they agreed that those that were negative did not represent most faculty.

In fact, Cody summarizes a prevailing viewpoint among the respondents: “I suppose the element of truth is that they're human beings. As humans, we're all subject to our own devices, or our own flaws...in my experience...professors, instructors, faculty members that I had come into contact are very professional.” While several respondents cited positive, affirming cinematic models such as *Good Will Hunting*'s Sean Maguire as personal inspirations, they were also inspired by real-life instructors and by the profession itself. Eric was especially enthusiastic:

I know the goals of most people in academia. It's really society based. It's really all about learning, and celebrating learning, and celebrating good thinking. It's celebrating ideas and thought and criticism...College professors are good people. They're really, really good people who care about people in a really broad way.

Ralph was similarly enthusiastic about the faculty he worked with on a daily basis:

I have known people that I think really did make a positive impact on students...especially when it comes to filmmaking here in this department. There

are some people who are really good teachers...they're really good at encouraging people to express themselves in film and to trust their own instincts...[they] really do help people in their careers and as artists as well.

Stuart also expressed admiration for exceptional professors, saying that these “visionaries” have changed “hundreds or thousands” of lives through their instruction.

Albert recalled the influence one of his graduate school professors had on his life and his interest in teaching:

...a professor of mine made you feel like you were the boss of your ideas and the boss of your life, and empowered you in a way...Empowered me. Empowered me in a way to shed all of the fear, and listen to the voice of encouragement within...if I can give that kind of thing that was given to me to other people, by god I'm going to do it. It is so rewarding. The pay sucks, but it is so rewarding.

Like Albert, many of the respondents expressed affection for their profession, despite any downsides. Kurt stated his excitement for a job that provides both teaching and creative opportunities:

I love it. And the thing is...I make a film every six months...which is [what] I love about teaching...you have the time to be able to be creative. So it's the best of both worlds. I get to do what I love and get to teach what I love...You get to make movies, you get to work with really young, creative, smart people that have great ideas, that see the world completely differently...it's like the greatest thing in the world.

Norman expresses a strikingly similar view:



I really love the classroom, and it was the best profession that I could imagine to be able to do everything that I wanted to do. Being creative, writing, being thoughtful, and then being in the classroom. It was really, probably, the best choice.

Several other respondents expressed an enjoyable connection to their job and their students, calling the job “awesome,” “gratifying,” “wonderful,” “amazing,” and “contagious.”

Not a single respondent voiced a desire to leave the profession or regret over having chosen it, but a few expressed concern that working conditions have worsened as of late. Declining state appropriations to higher education, an increased reliance on student tuitions, and performance based funding has resulted in more pressure for some faculty. According to Caroline, “the bar has been raised with less money, with less support, and higher expectations...and more students. The pressure is to have them graduate, and get good reviews. If you care about teaching, those sometimes are at odds.” Ralph claims that the profession is “ a...more depressing career” than it was in the past:

I think it has [gotten worse] because so many states have been cutting back on funding. Our new governor just said he was going to give us much less than what we'd been promised earlier, and so there's hiring freezes and all that kind of stuff. I think it's worse.

Samantha discussed another challenge for college professors: the decline in tenured rolls and increasing dependence on less expensive adjunct instructors in many places. Stuart admits that there are challenges in higher education today, but that they are similar to those faced in other institutions:

There's really bad underbelly to academia where talent is just not recognized and student experience just goes south. Just because of some administrative or clerical decision, somebody doesn't have what they need, or some stupid decision is made. It's just like...in any other part of the world. It has its problems.

As the respondents discussed the differences between their real-life interactions with professors and cultural, mass mediated stereotypes, their enthusiasm for the profession and their own work emerged as a durable theme. Additionally, many of them contested the veracity of negative professorial stereotypes in real life, citing their own professional experience. They also downplayed the incidences of such real-life transgressions by faculty as outliers. In fact, some cited inspirational real-life instructors as evidence of valuable teacher, mentor, or coach doing work that transforms student's lives, similar to *Good Will Hunting's* Robin Williams professor character. Moreover, some of the respondents expressed devotion to the profession amidst recent structural challenges that have made their jobs more difficult. The pervasive positivity in these responses suggests that the members of this interpretive community are positioned to apprehend cinematic college professors from a primarily positive and apologetic stance and to view negative cinematic stereotypes as distortions of reality and anomalous textual artifacts.

### **Conclusion**

Taking an *Husserlian* approach to audience reception theory as formulated by Casebier (1991), this project sought to investigate the relationship between the viewer and the art object, rather than the art object and the depicted reality. Instead of examining the representational aspects of the film and how well it achieves a kind of verisimilitude on its own, the project examined how a culturally conditioned interpretive community

engages with a number of texts to produce its interpretations – those that diverged from the group readings and those that converged. Respondents were not only confronting primary texts in the college professor films, they were also – in the words of Aden, et. al. (1995) – “activating” a number of other texts, such as the films themselves, their own experiences as students and college professors, their family experiences of higher education, the socialized idea of higher education, and traditional stereotypes about higher education transmitted through popular culture. As suggested by McGee (1990), the individual responses to the films depended on the “unique life experiences of individuals” which produced “idiosyncratic interpretations.” McGee claimed that individuals use fragments of previously encountered texts to construct their own texts, which in turn permit them to feel empowered within their own culture. Aden, et. al. maintained that the varied interpretations of an interpretive community could be explained through a combination of McGee’s concept of individual text production and Burke’s assertion that group identification can co-exist with individual separation from the group.

This social community is formed by a geographically diverse group of American film professors who engaged with a number of texts in ways formed by their shared experiences – film school, teaching assistantships, college teaching, film production, academic service, creative activity, research. They also engaged with these texts in ways shaped by their unique experiences. Some came from families filled with professional educators, while others were first generation college students. They all had diverse socioeconomic backgrounds as well. Yet, they converged in the creation of a conceptual view of the professoriate and the academic profession. Both Fish (1980) and Becker

(2007) asserted that the training provided by the interpretive community to the individual member produces a varying degree of sophistication. In this case, the film professor group is approaching the cinematic texts and popular conceptions of academia from a distinct point of view. They have inside knowledge of both film and higher education that challenges some of the distortions that accompany the stereotypical characterizations utilized by filmmakers in the name of creating a successful film narrative. They also possess a shared understanding of the codes used in these representations and how they have persisted through the years.

However, as noted by Jauss (1982), the respondents are also operating under a specific, temporally constricted cultural and historical context that currently informs their interpretations. Their knowledge of film history and the factors that shaped the cultural reception of older texts may have informed their conceptions in a way unique to other groups, but they are irrevocably influenced by the cultural assumptions and expectations of their own community and their own “time.” Their position in time will affect how they view both older texts and new ones, and how they articulate their viewpoints will change as time passes. Their stated views may also differ depending on their “audience.” For example, their interview responses may have been mediated by the fact that they were responding to questions from a fellow filmmaker/film professor. As suggested by Fish, context is required to generate meaning, and the community provides the norms necessary for interpretation. The respondents may have been articulating certain readings of filmic texts that were constructed by the interpretive community, while recognizing the writer as a member. The shared and “naturalized” codes may have allowed the interviewer and interviewee the opportunity to negotiate a shared understanding of the

referenced films, public conceptions of higher education, and cultural expectations of the professoriate that might not have been possible with a different interviewer. One can only speculate on how the responses would have differed in such a context, yet it is important to acknowledge the possibility for intersubjective interpretations during the research and how it may have contributed to group coherence among interview respondents and the interviewer.

Overall, interview responses contained evidence of both group convergence and individual divergence. For example, some respondents said that onscreen depictions of college professors were worsening, while others thought that increased gender diversity and the empowerment of intelligent, sympathetic female lead characters in recent films indicated positive changes to professor depictions. Others felt that recurrent professor stereotypes were unfair and that there was little evidence that real-life professors were as decadent as the cinematic ones, while some had seen a number of examples of bad professorial behavior in real life. However, there was a lot agreement. Most said that negative depictions of college professors on film are common and that they resemble many popular, historical stereotypes. Similarly, many respondents said that the general public has a negative view of the profession. Respondents also cited some evidence of positive and mixed on-screen characterizations, and several pointed to the nurturing mentor figure exemplified in *Good Will Hunting*'s Professor Maguire as an example of an excellent faculty member – one that continues to inspire them personally. The family backgrounds and early life experiences of the respondents varied widely, yet many of their conceptions of the profession and the associated cinematic representations were strikingly similar. For example, all of the respondents expressed great satisfaction with

their jobs, especially when they're able to work closely with students and make films of their own.

This study reveals an interpretive community that shares many reactions about cinematic depictions of college professors. On the whole, most identified a number of negative depictions fueled by popular culture stereotypes and negative public attitudes toward higher education and academics. They agreed that these attitudes are driven by a national anti-intellectual sentiment and that recent changes to the function and structure of a college education has exacerbated the criticism. Additionally, the group asserted that the cinematic depictions are unrealistic and disproportionately feature white, straight, males as professors, which complicates the relationship between conventional stereotypes and reality. While some recent portrayals offer more diversity and stronger female characters, they said that depictions of professors are growing worse, consonant with a general trend toward darker themes in all cinema and mass media. Finally, most of the respondents agree that prevailing negative stereotypes and dark narratives surrounding professors are an integral part of dramatic storytelling, and may not necessarily reflect a wider trend of acrimony from audiences or the general culture.

In addition to the seminal work this study provides on the experiences and conceptions of real-life film professors, future research should focus more closely on how minority professors are presented on film and how real-life minority professors conceive of the depictions and their own identities as academicians. This may be especially relevant for a profession that contains far more diversity than the popular culture representations suggest, yet still struggles with homogenized tenure track positions (Finkelstein, Conley, & Schuster, 2016). Additionally, an exploration of how student and

faculty interpretive communities differ in their apprehension and interpretation of college professor films may provide a greater understanding of student attitudes and expectations of teaching faculty and how these may vary by individual student characteristics (gender, scholarly performance, social class). Such a project might consider how mass media images affect the retention and persistence of students who are reluctant to engage with faculty.

As American mass media expand to include a number of updated traditional forms such as 3D cinema, digital home streaming, and graphic novels, as well as newer forms like video games and interactive media, higher education researchers have many opportunities to investigate how mediated representations of faculty affect various audiences and communities. Furthermore, investigating how content creators such as filmmakers construct these images may assist faculty members and other higher education stakeholders in addressing entrenched stereotypes that damage public conceptions of the professoriate. This is crucial in a political environment fraught with uncertainty for education and for a culture that is increasingly questioning the role of the college professor and the institution of higher education.

Table 2

*Interview Participants*

Name	Institution Type	Appointment Type	Years Teaching
Mike	Private	Non-tenure track	7
Jim	Private	Tenure track	9
Eric	Public	Tenure track	4
Norman	Private	Tenure track	18
Ralph	Public	Tenured	29
Kurt	Private	Tenured	32
Krista	Public	Non-tenure track	20
Samantha	Public	Non-tenure track	15
Albert	Private	Non-tenure track	8
Dennis	Public	Tenured	18
Stuart	Private	Non-tenure track	26
Caroline	Public	Tenure track	15
Cody	Public	Non-tenure track	4



## SECTION 4: MAKING A COLLEGE PROFESSOR FILM: A CASE STUDY

Films that feature college professor characters in a leading role are more common than one might expect. A little more than 130 American films with a professor in the lead have been produced since 1929, and the depictions range from fantastic to ordinary. From the swashbuckling and iconic *Indiana Jones* character to *The Da Vinci Code*'s globetrotting Professor Langdon, to Clint Eastwood's assassin/art professor in *The Eiger Sanction*, some cinematic professors lead exciting double lives. Other characterizations are more mundane (*The Savages*, 2007; *The Visitor*, 2008), troubled (*Straw Dogs*, 1971; *The Gambler*, 1974; *Irrational Man*, 2015), or inspiring (*Good Will Hunting*, 1997; *Kinsey*, 2004; *Mona Lisa Smile*, 2003). Despite the variety of depictions, a number of cinematic professors conform to long-standing cultural stereotypes, along with their campuses, offices, and classrooms. A number of these popular culture depictions have been explored in previously published scholarship, yet there is currently no research on how professor images are created by filmmakers. This case study consists of interviews with a team of filmmakers who produced a "college professor" film. It examines how prior personal experiences, cultural attitudes, other films, popular stereotypes, the demands of the American filmmaking process and of the film marketplace may have informed their creative process. The project also examines these filmmakers as an interpretive community, one whose shared conceptions of higher education and academicians converge in work that reproduces traditional representations of higher education and professorial archetypes.

### Depictions of Professors on Film

Some scholars have argued that professors commonly appear as negative

characters, which both damages public perceptions of the academy and the professoriate, and reflects existing public opinion (Long, 1996; Reynolds, 2007; Reynolds, 2014; Polan, 1993). Moreover, a number of observers have documented recurrent negative on-screen stereotypes, including the absent-minded professor, the philandering cad, the lazy tenured instructor, and the bitter educator (Overall, 2010; DiPaolo, 2015; Roberts, 2010; Thomas, 2009; Guillermo, 2015). Others have observed that recent cinematic college professors exhibit a number of unhealthy or anti-social behaviors and psychological ailments (Williams, 2010; Yaffe, 2015; Deresiewicz, 2007), and that such depictions undermine higher education by questioning the moral character and fitness of its faculty. Yet, a number of other scholars have documented positive representations of college professors on screen, many of which draw upon cultural stereotypes that surround educators in general (Umphlett, 1984; Conklin, 2008). Such academicians are presented as inspirational mentors (*Good Will Hunting*, 1997; *Higher Learning*, 1995; *Drumline*, 2002; *Mona Lisa Smile*, 2003; *Age of Consent*, 1932), experts in their field (*The Da Vinci Code*, 2006; *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, 2008; *Arrival*, 2016), comedic and romantic figures (*The Nutty Professor*, 1996; *The Male Animal*, 1942; *The Trouble with Women*, 1947; *Flubber*, 1997), or “ordinary” people hiding beneath academic garb (*Swing It, Professor*, 1938; *College Humor*, 1933; *Varsity Show*, 1937; *She’s Working Her Way Through College*, 1952).

The extent to which depictions of college professors significantly affect the attitudes and beliefs of general audiences is open for debate and further study. Citing George Gerbner’s popular *cultivation theory* of mass media (Gerbner, et. al., 2002), Long claims that fictional depictions of college professors are both a reflection of existing

public attitudes, and a force that shapes them. Similarly, Oliker (1993) claims that the various representations of professors in television and film reflect the public's ever changing relationship with educational institutions. Tobolowsky and Reynolds (2017a) also assert that fictional representations of higher education in popular media cultivate audience attitudes and expectations. These "repetitive and consistent" messages about college and faculty "promote and engrain specific beliefs about college, especially in audience members who may lack personal experience." (p. 180). Both Conklin (2008) and Umphlett (1984) also claim that professor films both reflect and shape public attitudes. Overall, the literature on college films documents various aspects of the on-screen professor and university life, and suggests that these images are culturally significant. However, to date, no one has investigated how these depictions are created, sustained or reproduced. An assessment of the cinematic representation of social reality should include a discussion of the process by which these representations are created, and how fictional characters are formed on screen. At the outset of such a discussion, a few theoretical approaches to the construction of cinematic characters and narratives should be considered.

### **Auteur Theory and Interpretive Communities**

*Auteur theory* departs from the traditional, collaborative approach to film production and ascribes authorship of the film to the director, rather than the screenwriter, the production crew and cast, or the film studio. Based on the writings of a group of film critics and theorists in the French publication, *Cahiers du Cinema*, the idea was popularized in late 1960's and 1970's America, at a time when young, film school educated directors were challenging the conventions of the old Hollywood system.

Auteur theory claimed that a film's director was the primary artistic creator of the film, much like a painter, writer or sculptor is credited with sole authorship of their creations. At its roots, the theory was a reaction to the national French film system that many critics felt had become sterile and soulless. Iconoclastic novice filmmakers like Jean Luc Godard embraced auteur theory in creating work that would be known as the *French New Wave*. These experimental and controversial films had a profound impact of post-war baby boomer American directors like Francis Ford Coppola, whose own works were challenging the status quo and accompanying the disruptive social movements of the late-60's and early 70's through the new American independent film movement. Thus, the idea of director as auteur took hold in the United States and eventually became part of mainstream film marketing efforts of several blockbuster films by major studios (e.g. Steven Spielberg films).

Since the 1950's the idea has attracted controversy, and critics of the theory have countered with a number of arguments (Kael, 1963; Brody, 2012; Eig, 2014). They correctly claim that the finished film is the result of the collaboration of a number of individuals - creative artists, technicians and craftspeople – who contribute their own personal touch to the production. They also note that until the 1950's the director had little control over the final film, and that studio personnel (especially the producer) held veto power over content. Further, they assert that the director still has only limited power, especially when dealing with studios or private investors. Other critics have claimed that many films directed by the same director do not possess a continuous or recognizable quality that evokes the director's personality. Moreover, they argue that a film is not created in a vacuum – temporally constrained social and cultural forces exert themselves

on the creation of art and entertainment products, and a single person can rarely take sole credit for what is a socially created phenomenon. Finally, critics also note that the success (commercial or artistic) often depends upon the film's lead actor, and that star power can obscure the director's work. In fact, in some films, the special effects, music, choreography, or cinematography or other elements may explain a film's artistic appeal.

The debate over auteurism in film production continues, but many scholars agree that each key crewmember exerts something of their own identity throughout the collaborative artistic process:

Even if we can't always identify a single "author" of a film...directors, writers, producers, stars, editors, cinematographers may all have a hand in shaping a movie; they all shape it, at least in part, because of their ideas, values, or unconscious desires. (O'Brien, 2016, p. 21).

As such, most feature films remain collaborate projects that may reflect the individual identities on the creative team and their dynamic interactions with other phenomena.

### **Interpretive Communities: Makers and Users**

Despite the immense personal influence of the director and other key creative production team members, audience studies and reception theory scholars have argued that audience members ultimately determine how a text is received and how its ultimate meaning is constructed (Holub, 2013; McQuail, 1997; Jauss & Benzing, 1970). A film's audience is ostensibly composed of a heterogeneous group of individuals who carry their own perspectives and biases into the theater, consuming the content individually and subjectively. Yet, some researchers argue that the viewer's understanding of the film is influenced by larger structural influences, like their

affiliation with a particular social group, the cultural forces exerted upon that group, and external social events occurring at the time of the viewing. According to Stanley Fish (1980), viewers or readers of a text do not receive or conceive of that text autonomously. Instead, they belong to a socially defined and culturally conditioned community that construes the text. These interpretive communities employ shared interpretive strategies in order to construct the artwork. Moreover, Fish argued that the interpretive community creates the interpretive viewer himself. As a product “of social and cultural patterns of thought,” (p. 332), this viewer has been taught to employ institutionalized viewpoints when confronting the text, and as such are predisposed to view the film’s content and characters in a certain way. Thus, the audience member’s conception of a film is not individualized, but rather communal.

Extending Fish’s theory in a discussion of filmmakers and viewers, Becker (2007) considers the role of the text maker. He claims that these *makers* also constitute an interpretive community of sorts and that they create standardized representations of reality for a group of *users*. The *makers*’ constructions, whether fictional or non-fiction, are designed to evoke a specific response from the *users*. The successful exchange of information about society between these two groups depends upon a couple of factors. First, the *makers* and *users* must have a shared conception of certain codes that signal social reality. Any misunderstanding of these standard representational codes will interfere with the efficient exchange of comprehensible information. Furthermore, the filmmaker (*maker*) must account for variations in the viewing abilities of the diverse audience (*users*). According to Becker, some members of an interpretive community have not been trained as deeply as others, and thus the filmmaker must make

representational content that will be easily understood by a large number of people.

We have all had some training, starting as young children, in construing such objects, but we haven't all had training and experience with all kinds of representations. These abilities are distributed differentially along all kinds of lines of social division. (p. 55).

Second, *makers* and *users* must adapt to each other over time. As social conventions change, so will representations of social reality, and as such both parties must participate in the generation and understanding of evolving texts: "if the users don't do their part, the story doesn't get told, or doesn't get told as the story the makers intended." (p. 286).

Enduring, shared cultural codes make the construction of a shared social reality possible, but they can also inhibit innovative and unique representations. Becker claims that the use of standardized representations can also encourage distortions and abstractions of social reality – unavoidable reductive summaries and distillations of complex information that resemble and recall stereotypes.

### **Archetypes and Stereotypes**

In literature, theatre, film, psychology and philosophy, archetypes have been useful for artists who want create characters that will resonate with readers and audiences, and for scholars who seek to identify and explain perennial features of human behavior. From the work of influential Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (Jung & Von Franz, 1968; Jung, 2014) to that of Russian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff (2008; Thomas, 2010) to the work of highly regarded Hollywood screenwriting coach Blake Snyder (2005), these "original patterns" have provided a useful taxonomy for many scholars and artists. According to archetype theory, recurring human types like the *explorer*, the *rebel*, the

*jester* and the *sage* often transcend culture, geography, and time period (Robertson, 1995). They are reminders that the various personalities of the members of the species, and the stories we tell, are much the same all over the world.

According to traditional Jungian archetypal theory, the “sage” archetype is usually associated with the traditional teacher figure and is closely aligned with spiritual or religious work (Mayes, 2002, 1999). However, cinematic college professors and their archetypes have attracted very little scholarly consideration. Notable exceptions include Conklin (2008), Hinton (1994), and Umphlett (1984). Conklin discusses some of the recurrent cinematic portrayals of professors and the accompanying themes that have emerged over the years. These include the instructor as an archetypal mentor, coach, love interest, romantic crush, and adversary. Similarly, Umphlett and Hinton both present investigations of the changing representations of professors on film over time – dusty academicians and uptight scholars, heartthrobs and politically inspired radicals, and fully formed leading characters – but neither establishes clear conventions for recurring archetypes. In addition to these published resources, a number of internet blogs and online magazines discuss various professor archetypes, but there is no clear consensus on how to systematically frame or catalog these depictions.

While stereotypes – the oft-criticized cousins of archetypes - are usually thought to be overly reductive and culturally offensive, some argue that a good deal of complex social and cultural information is transmitted through them easily and quickly (Dyer, 1999). Nonetheless, the positive association of using archetypes in film was solidified by Joseph Campbell’s extremely influential discussion on archetypes in various mythologies, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Since its release, the book has



inspired scores of American screenwriters and filmmakers, and has become essential reading for many students in film school. Moreover, the criticism over cultural, gender-based, ethnic or religious stereotypes in Hollywood films has grown in recent years (MacAdam, 2008; Brook, 2014; Shaheen, 2003), and many screenwriters and filmmakers have responded by attempting to avoid any appearance of featuring what many filmmakers and screenwriters call “lazy” or “sloppy” depictions. Instead, they point to archetypes as guiding models for their characters.

### **Methodology**

This case study (Yin, 2013) investigates various factors that influenced the decisions of key crewmembers in constructing representations of higher education and college professors in their creation of an American college professor film. The research was guided by the following questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. How do filmmakers’ conceptions of higher education and professors inform their decisions during the filmmaking/screenwriting process?
2. How do filmmakers’ own collegiate experiences contribute to the representations of faculty they construct in their film?
3. What other factors influence the filmmakers’ depictions of faculty and faculty life in their film?

Employing semi-structured interviews with members of a college professor film’s “creative team,” this study examines how three members of this interpretive community of *makers* constructed the professor characters and their personal and professional settings. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann,

2008) with the director/screenwriter, production designer, and costume designer of a completed full-length narrative fiction film, the pseudonymously named *Master Class*. The film, which explores the intricacies of academia from the faculty point of view, features a college professor as the lead character, and a few college professors as supporting characters. The film had a relatively small budget, yet featured some well-known film performers and the crew was staffed with experienced production professionals. Given the expectation and request for anonymity from the interview respondents, this paper will present few details about the plot and specific characters in the film.

Recruiting emails were sent directly to potential participants, or requests were emailed to their agent or manager. Successfully recruiting participants was difficult, as many film professionals can only be contacted through their representative agent, who serves as a gatekeeper to limit requests that might be considered burdensome for the individual. Furthermore, working film professionals are extremely busy and tend to focus intently on one project at a time – a pace that prevents them from engaging in some extracurricular projects. The sample size was especially constrained by limited access to film professionals, particularly with the condition that they all needed to be part of one film’s creative team. After attempting to secure participants from five different “professor film” projects, the screenwriter and director for *Master Class* agreed to participate in the study. The film’s production designer and costume designer agreed shortly afterward, and the director of photography and editor declined, as they were busy with other films during the data collection period. Following IRB approval, hour-long phone interviews with each participant were recorded and transcribed. Interview questions were designed

to prompt participants to discuss their roles in the creation of the film's leading professor character, as well as the process they followed to determine the characterization and how their own attitudes and experiences may have shaped their work. Pseudonyms for the participants are used throughout the study.

Analysis of the interviews followed the best practices of qualitative analysis and exploratory case study outlined by Creswell in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (2013) and by Yin in *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (2013). Using the constant comparison method in conjunction with grounded theory, and through the coding of interview transcripts, emerging and common themes from all of the responses were identified and analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As recommended by Yin, I, as the case study investigator (also a filmmaker), possess professional familiarity with the phenomenon (the filmmaking process) that provided a degree of sensitivity and adaptability to the interview responses and respondents. Furthermore, as I could be considered part of the participants' interpretive community, and as such may be susceptible to certain expectations and suppositions, researcher self-reflection was necessary throughout the data collection and analysis. Thus, it is important that I disclose my identification – as both a filmmaker and film professor - with this particular group.

### **Approximating Reality**

Appearances matter, both in films and in reality. Filmmakers, dramatists, and thespians have long known that all aspects of human behavior and appearance contribute to believable representations of fictional characters. Since the late 1890's, filmmakers and screen actors have relied upon techniques borrowed from their theatrical cousins,

employing clothing, makeup, hair styles, dialect, accent, vocal tone, cadence, set design, lighting, music, and props to provide cues to an individual character's innermost self. In both theatre and film, observable aspects of a character (spoken words, sounds, movements, personal belongings, and settings) are indications of their personal self-conception. These phenomena signal the character's self-conception and reflect their desire to be viewed in a certain way by others. Moreover, in films, as in life, the identity of the character is situated within a socially constructed space, and confirmed or validated through certain externalized "announcements" by and about the individual (Stone, 1990; Goffman, 1978). In other words, a character's deliberately constructed appearance and contextual behaviors determine how viewers apprehend their profession, personality type, social class, and socio-economic position. Audiences perform these summative and often reductive assessments instantaneously and unconsciously, just as people do in real life (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Dramatists and filmmakers depend upon these various signals for their expediency – the more quickly viewers can "recognize" cinematic characters as analogues of their own real-life experiences, the more efficiently the story can be told without excessive exposition on character background. Thus, wardrobe, makeup, hairstyles, regional dialects, and a myriad of other externalities become basic elements of character construction.

While this formal, physical approach to fictional characterization may invite transgressive stereotypical caricatures of specific social groups and professions, it also endeavors to provide the verisimilitude necessary for the suspension of disbelief among viewers. Once audience members can accept staged or filmed performances as legitimate and realistic, they can become fully immersed in the story as if it were happening in real

life (Schaper, 1978; Ferri, 2007; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Thus, in most cases, filmmakers strive for a degree of realism in their productions and use a complex assortment of culturally sanctioned signals to approximate reality. The construction of these signals is achieved through a dynamic collaboration between key members of the film's creative team, such as the director, production designer, wardrobe designer, and cinematographer.

### **The Director**

Due to her proximity to both the actor and camera, the director maintains the most essential position on set. She supervises the actor and other key crewmembers in the construction of on-screen personifications of scripted characters. As Charles and Mirella Affron assert,

Only two of the elements of feature film are subject to being photographed: actors and décor. Actors have a narrative analog in character...just as décor has in fictional space. And of the two elements subject to photography, actor (or human figure) and décor (or place), it is the human figure that is privileged in film. (Affron and Affron, 1995, p. 35).

Through the actor, the director's medium is the entire corporeal human system: posture, gait, facial expression, vocal tone and volume, accent, body and eye movements. The *production designer* and her crew participate in this co-creation by adding wardrobe, makeup, hair styling, props, set dressing, and sets. The cinematographer and her lighting crew will add and shape light, while the editor, sound designer, and music composer collaborate to set the pace and emotional tone of the onscreen action. However, the basic activity and appearance of the human form on screen is the most essential component of

the film – and that is the sacrosanct territory of the director. Moreover, the director designs, coordinates, and oversees the most basic formal aspects of cinematic storytelling; camera placement, angle, movement, blocking, etc. Everything we see on screen has been either ordered or approved by the director. Carefully constructing a cinematic character's appearance, actions, and affect can provide effective representations of fictional characters and place that character within a certain socially constrained space.

Recurrent representations of fictional college professors tend to share certain embodied characteristics – traits that have been largely shaped by the directors. Cinematic college professors often speak deliberately, with perfect grammar and an erudite accent. In almost every case, their dialect is free from regionalisms or other stereotypical markers of the working class. They often move comfortably in front of a packed class with a piece of chalk in one hand as a massive blackboard looms in the background. They seem to be the smartest person in the room, no matter where they are, and when they're doing research they seem to be engaged in an inscrutably difficult, lonely, or painful task. Often, when they're the film's leading character, they're fit, thin, attractive, able-bodied or athletic, and overwhelmingly white, male, and heterosexual. They often exude an air of respectability and erudition, seemingly obtained through contact with classical tomes, arcane ideas, and intricate concepts. These representational trends are widespread and have been criticized as mere stereotypes sustained by careless directors.

### **The Production Designer and the Set**

If the director's primary medium consists of the actor, then the production

designer's consists of the physical space the actor occupies. The *production designer* - sometimes mistaken for the *art director* - works with the director, producer, and director of photography (cinematographer) to determine how sets, locations, props, makeup, hair, and set dressing will be employed to support the vision of the screenwriter and director. Using the screenplay as a kind of blueprint, the production designer will design the overall "look" of the film and individual scenes, in addition to implementing that design. With the exception of the actor, any and every part of the film set is under her purview. Although production design has been an integral part of the production process since 1903, the fast-paced, factory-like studio system of the 1930's made production designers an essential part of any feature film production (Barnwell, 2004).

Of course, the sets created by the production designer are more than spaces in which the actors move; they also provide essential developmental elements to the narrative: "If it is successful, a set will give indications not only of time and place but also of the psychology of the characters, and in so doing offers a wealth of possible information regarding plot and narrative development." (Barnwell, p. 21). As Barnwell further states, film sets serve as "an interactive element of the narrative" that create "contrast and harmony that load the image with meaning." (p. 27). Settings and spaces communicate an abundance of social information. Physical spaces can influence a number of interpersonal interactions. For college professors, the placement of their office desk and office décor may affect how a student feels about them (Morrow & McElroy, 1981), the friendliness or workload of the professor (Campbell, 1979), how positively they felt about their professor (Zweigenhaft, 1976). Additionally, the quality of student performance feedback may be determined by faculty office design (Becker, et. al., 1983),

and desk placement might signal a professor's academic rank and age (Zweigenhaft, 1976). Furthermore, desk placement in academic offices is associated with a variety of individual workloads and personality differences among professors (Hensley, 1982). Hence, carefully designing the personal workspaces of the on-screen professor is essential to characterization, as is the selection of the campus setting.

### **University Campuses, Academic Offices, and Classrooms on Film**

Popular culture representations of American college campuses usually resemble archetypal Ivy League and liberal arts universities, featuring tidy, green leafy campuses filled with historical buildings and lined with ancient trees. In reality, the appearance of university campuses varies widely by type, location, and age. Yet, the "Northeastern style" dominates cinematic depictions and borrows heavily from historic real-life institutions like Columbia University and the College of William and Mary. The architecture and layout of many of these seminal American institutions were modeled on the 13<sup>th</sup> century British campuses of Oxford and Cambridge (Pearce, 2001). While the construction of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale was directly inspired by the Oxbridge style in the 1600's, by the early 1800's, Thomas Jefferson's vision for a uniquely American institution was taking root in the design of New World colleges and universities. As at U.Va., buildings on American universities borrowed from a number of continental styles, such as classical Roman and Greek, Gothic Revival, Italian, English Renaissance, and Italianate (Tolles, 2011).

Thus, the idea of an archetypal American university has become entrenched in fictional depictions as an idyllic space, filled with stately, continental stone and brick buildings, interconnected by paved walkways across well-manicured lawns. In college



films, we are often presented with these idealized depictions, rarely seeing the concrete-filled, energy efficient, industrial style that became common at many state schools and community colleges in the 1960's and '70's. In fact, the former has been featured in dozens of American college films over the decades, while the latter seldom gets screen time (*The Eiger Sanction*, 1975; *Larry Crowne*, 2011; *Getting Straight*, 1970). Even less common is what might be called the “contemporary university” – a blend of recent constructions and historical structures, new technology, and traditional design (*Arrival*, 2016).

The academic offices depicted in many American college films are similarly romanticized and associated with an erudite tradition. Old World building construction and illumination seems designed to lend these professor spaces a credibility borne of nostalgia. At times, they constitute a kind of shrine to traditional classical education. At others, they will suggest an artist's working studio, or evoke the prototypical classical library. Like the general campus, cinematic depictions of professorial workspaces and classrooms will often eschew the contemporary in favor of the classical. When more current offices are depicted, they retain traditional elements alongside newer set dressings (*The Rewrite*, 2014; *Larry Crowne*, 2011; *Arrival*, 2016; *Still Alice*, 2014).

### **The Costume Designer and the Wardrobe**

The *costume designer* works in the art department under the production designer's purview. Working closely and collaboratively with the director and the actors, the costume designer helps create the single most important aspect of the film – the human character.

Using the screenplay as the primary guide, the costume designer researches, designs, selects, tailors, and often creates the costumes worn by all of the characters in the film. In the construction of these costumes, she contends with a number of formal cinematic factors: the color palette of the sets, the characteristics of the light, the historical and cultural context of the action, and the geographic space of the film's setting. Like the production designer with her crew of scenic artists, she will often supervise her own crew of costumers who work to ensure that costumes have aged or "worn" appropriately throughout the film's action, and that they are suitably realistic.

Sarah Street (2001) writes that costume designers are especially concerned with creating costumes that conform to contemporaneous cultural conventions - what she calls "social verisimilitude" – sartorial designs that resonate with a viewer's own lived experience (Street, p. 7). Further, Street emphasizes the role of wardrobe in the cinematic narrative, and the importance of realism: "The realist imperative encourages a fashion system which is reflective of how 'ordinary' people use fashion, the different characters' relationships with each other, their social class, as well as punctuating narrative events in subtle ways." (p. 75). However, she emphasizes that costuming is not just about realism, it's also helping to communicate a number of things to characterization, such as "performance, gender, status, and power." (p. 2). Thus, the film costume designer uses various materials to reflect the character's personality, self-conception, history, profession and class.

**Professor costumes on film.** Recurrent popular culture images of the male college professor usually feature middle-aged white guys wearing tweed jackets with leather patches on the elbows, sweater vests, eyeglasses and bowties. Similarly, cinematic

professors are often sporting gray, brown or black corduroy, smoking pipes and navigating huge stacks of books and papers. Sometimes they are bearded, and they rarely wear business suits. Filmic female professors often don pantsuits, slacks topped with comfortable-looking sweaters, dark colors, slightly conservative dresses, blazers, or (when the instructor is teaching law or business), power suits. Sometimes the professor wears a lab coat over their business attire and protective goggles. These caricatures immediately evoke specific personality traits and social behaviors long associated with a certain “type.” However, the appearances of real life professors differ, varying widely according to university, program, discipline, historical setting, and personality type (Reynolds, 2014). In some films, we see this variation on display. For example, filmic portrayals of science professors have differed significantly from those of English professors. However, there is usually a lack of variability in the cinematic depictions of professor attire. To account for this homogeneity, we must consider the use of stereotypes and archetypes by filmmakers.

### **Findings**

Subjects were asked to reflect on a number of influences on their work on *Master Class*, including their past college experiences and contact with college campuses and real-life professors. They also recalled the process they followed during the planning and execution of the film, as well as how the final film departed from the original screenplay. They discussed the role of realism in creating a film and how cinematic college professors differed from real-life instructors, as well as how previous college films impacted their creative decisions. Other themes included the use of stereotypes and

archetypes in cinema, the contemporary film marketplace, and the importance of connecting with an audience member.

### **Background and College Experiences**

As members of a creative team and a community of *makers*, the respondents' individual educational experiences may have shaped both their own conceptions of college and college professors, as well as the group's collective vision for the on-screen professor. The three key crewmembers shared similar backgrounds. They all attended very prestigious and academically rigorous liberal arts universities – some of the most acclaimed in the nation – and belonged to middle to upper-middle class, well-educated families. They were all raised in the Northeastern region of the country near large urban centers, and they are all white. Like most students, there was some variation in their interactions with professors and their individual experiences in higher education. However, the homogeneity of this small creative community may have significantly affected their collaborations on *Master Class*, and their final rendering of the professor characters in the film.

Noel loved college and when he decided to write and direct a feature film, the decision to set it on campus was an easy one. Although he had never worked in higher education, he taught for a year at a boarding school and used those experiences to inform his work as screenwriter and director on *Master Class*. College had been such a great experience for Noel that he was keen to delve into that “atmosphere” again through the film. Both of his parents completed undergraduate degrees and he had studied English Literature at a large, lauded, selective public university with a long history. Shortly after graduation, he dove into the film industry by moving to a large film city and enrolling in

a small private school to pursue a graduate degree in screenwriting. When he first began the script for *Master Class*, his own positive experiences and the archetypal idyllic college campus inspired him:

I started out and I was, like...I think college would be a really fun setting for a movie that I like and I could put my heart into because I had a good experience there and it's a cool world that's cinematically beautiful, you know. If you go to a really nice campus and you have the fall leaves and stuff like that...Okay, I want to write something that takes place on a college campus. It started there, and then I was, okay, what's it [the movie] about?

After reading an article about a number of conflicts between real life university faculty, he decided to explore the internal politics of academia in his film.

Like Noel, Lila didn't major in film as an undergraduate, focusing instead on studio art and art history at a large, extremely selective private university in a big city. College seemed like a natural choice for her as well; her father finished graduate school, her mother graduated from a community college, and her stepmother obtained a master's degree that led her to work as a college professor. She found her way into the film industry as a production designer through a friend who was going to film school at a nearby university:

[My friend] was at [film school] at the same time that I was [across town at my university]...So, very fortunate for me...I'd spend my weekdays studying art history with all of the academics folks, [and] spend my weekends at [the film school] with all of the kind of crazy filmmakers. So, I got sort of a second hand

education with those guys. And I ended up just doing a bunch of their student films. So, we were all in college together. That was how I got started.

Lila's conceptions of college and professors were shaped significantly by her professor stepmother, and her stepmother's colleagues and friends. Lila said that these people deeply influenced her ideas about academia. She was "enchanted" by these "incredibly eclectic" individuals, their spaces and belongings:

They always just had amazing collections of things from traveling, or collections of books that were just beautiful and...amazing art on their walls...I just remember...thinking...'what a fabulous and interesting group of people.' And, everybody has something interesting to talk about...everybody [was] very inclusive, and a little eccentric...very academic and very cerebral.

For Lila, the piles of paper and stacks of books in these places resonated with the image of the Michael Douglas professor character in the 2000 film, *Wonder Boys*, which she describes as "refreshing," "inviting," "warm," and reminiscent of her stepmother's occupational and social world.

Neither of costume designer Kate's parents attended college. Her conceptions of academia were initially formed when she attended a very selective mid-sized private university in a region far from her home. Once she recovered from the culture shock, she settled on a degree in communications and human resources, and had no opportunities to work on films until after graduation when she moved to a city with a large film industry. Her passion for collecting vintage jewelry and unusual clothing quickly led her into opportunities to work with renowned costume designers, and launched a successful film

career. At the university, she noticed variations in professorial appearance, an observation that would later inform her research and design work on *Master Class*:

...in academia, I feel like some people, not everybody but certainly [some], they kind of have a uniform...It's funny, you do notice [differences]...even as student I recognized the anthropology professor was always hip and cool. The geology people...I feel like you could pick out the political science professor, [he was] a little bit different...I certainly did notice my poly-sci professor always came in with that bow tie. It was just such a classic [look].

Each respondent articulated affection for their university days, for real life and cinematic instructors. Their backgrounds also indicate extensive experience in making films in major industry centers.

### **Making the Film**

Like many independent filmmakers – especially those who are directing their own screenplay - Noel had to contend with financial backers and others who had a different idea of what the film should be. While he wanted to make a quirky, funny film in Alexander Payne's realistic style, some of his investors wanted a broader, more slapstick tone. Throughout production and postproduction, he would find himself reminding them to read the script, because they seemed to have forgotten the original premise:

... but they knew it was a comedy, they knew it was with [a well-known comedic actor], and so when I turned in this sort of more thoughtful comedy, they wanted to amp it up in places...I was also working with...the distributors and the financiers were very inexperienced and had never made a movie before...so they didn't really know what they wanted, to be honest.

This demonstrates some of the external pressures that filmmakers face when trying to portray any profession or workspace in a realistic fashion, but it can be especially difficult when so many films set on college campuses have been zany, physical comedies in the tradition of *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) and *Old School* (2003). Ultimately, Noel was committed to his vision and protected “95% of the film” from straying into something he never wanted to make, but he does admit that this choice limited the film’s commercial success. Like so many other directors, he said he fought hard for his original idea, and he’s proud of his decision, but his efforts:

...affected the outcome of how many people actually saw my movie, because they didn't give it a big release, and I think if I'd played ball a little bit more they [the distributors] would have maybe put it on more screens and had more people... There was a lot of pressure in [postproduction] to make it funnier...everybody goes through this.

From the beginning, Noel wanted to write a “good, fun, realistic” comedy about a college professor, and he was so committed to realism that he sent drafts of his scripts to a college professor friend who worked at a university near his hometown. He told his friend that he didn’t want to make a film that would make academics storm out of the theater in anger. After his friend gave him a “passing grade” for realism, Noel redoubled his efforts to paint a believable picture of a college professor just beginning his career:

In a way, it's almost like arrested development, not the show but the act, where he's kind of stuck in this place, because he hasn't gone after what he really wants. He's gone after this academic path of glory that his father set him off on. He's stuck in his world. So for me, the apartment and his clothes and everything



needed to reflect that...I wanted to really go into that world of the...assistant professor, who's really not making all that much money and trying to grow up, so the setting was definitely important and I wanted it to be realistic.

However, Noel and his crew had to balance realism with the desire to depict a romanticized version of the academy – one that would do justice to Noel's affection for college campuses, especially the one he attended, a very old institution, which features neo-classical, Jeffersonian design elements. The original script described a run-down, unpopular, aging, inexpensive, fictional college, but Noel chose to film at a well-kept, historical university. The contrast between setting and script resulted in an unusual dilemma. The campus was too pretty:

...because [the film] was shot at a beautiful campus...we didn't have enough money to make it look bad, so it was one of those things where my production designer was like, 'Well, what if we put some overflowing garbage cans,' you know, little things like that, which we tried to do, but on the whole I didn't really nail the look for the college that I wanted...Although I do like the way the movie looks because it's beautiful and sort of brings you back to the nostalgic college setting. But in my mind when I wrote it, it was going to be a little bit more community college looking, like low slung buildings and that kind of stuff.

The fact that the filming location did not match Noel's original idea, but that he used the setting anyway, suggests both his reluctance to depict college in a way that is at odds with his own appreciation for the idealized, aesthetic campus and recognition that many audience members expect an amount of spectacle and style from motion pictures:

So, with the design of the actual look of the college, I had something very different in mind in my head, but it was a blessing and a curse, because I also think that it made the movie pretty, and it's a nice movie to look at because of all the beautiful architecture of the college. And that brings people back to that world, and that helps the story. If I had made it look horrible, it might have been harder...had a different feel, and it would have affected the way people liked or didn't like the film.

Lila articulated that she had to perform the same balancing act for her work on the film. When she and Noel first began to collaborate on the production design, they viewed several films set on college campuses and were inspired by the abundance of traditional, romanticized representations. Lila says they were drawn to a certain look, and drew from that rather than from her own experience with real-life academic settings:

I didn't actually pull too much of my own experience. But, I do remember we looked a whole lot at *Wonder Boys*...that just kind of entrenched in academia and literature, sort of professor was what we...really responded to...And I just kind of harkening back to some of the much more traditional kind of school offices [like] *Dead Poet's Society* and things like that...I think we wanted...a very traditional setting for the college professor...beautiful natural lighting...and a little bit of warm lamp light...it just looked like the quintessential professor's office.

When she and Noel were scouting the campus for an office for the lead character, they found a space that Lila said would be “recognizable for the audience,” one with “wooden molding everywhere, old wooden bookcases...great, warm natural colors, books in leather...great warm lamp light.” In other words, an office that resembled a number of

cinematic representations of academic offices from a variety of eras, but with roots in old world institutions like those seen in the Indiana Jones films and *The Paper Chase*. In fact, Lila's own real-life experience with these types of institutions was limited. Despite attending an elite university, most of her personal experiences with professors were in the university's art studio or adjunct instructor's offices that differed dramatically from the prototypical Ivy League setting. When she thinks about the scouting and research on professorial spaces she has done since completing *Master Class*, she says that she has seen "a whole range of economies and different levels of academia," and that the one they did for *Master Class* "was definitely the idealized version."

Like Lila, Kate began her design process by studying the screenplay and consulting with Noel on the characters.

Well, firstly, you know when you read a script...you try to get a feel for who this person is and what their everyday life is and then you speak with the director...and hear what he has to say and how he wants this character to be. You kind of take into consideration the decisions [the characters have] made in their lives to get where they are...You try to then costume somebody accordingly so that, you're giving the visual narrative to the story.

Kate's vision for each character was inspired by the professors she encountered in her undergraduate days, but she also did quite a lot of her own research on the sartorial habits of real-life professors by sitting at a local university and watching instructors walk by. Although she did see variation in dress, she also noticed the role that "texture and function" played in sustaining what had become a sort of "uniform," especially for male professors. Tweed, for example, can serve a practical purpose in the northern fall and

winter. Moreover, Kate said that these uniforms provide a psychological feeling of “safety” for the wearer. Since the lead character was a novice professor striving for his first tenured job, Kate said it was important that his wardrobe reflected his financial difficulty and a sense of being unsure about his decision to work in academia. She said that Noel told her that this character “didn’t think too much” about what he wore each day. Conversely, when dressing the leading female professor character, Kate and Noel wanted to emphasize the character’s greater comfort with the job. Additionally, Kate suggested that the female lead must have a certain visual appeal:

...she was fresh and a little bit more interested in the academic nature of things. A little more old school [than the male lead] even though she was a young person. There was a way to keep a little bit of a sexiness about her because she was our only female lead. That also matters in film... These things all matter. To have sort of that [sexiness], to build a little bit of interest and to pique the interest of people around her, that kind of thing, and yet still be appropriate because she took her job very seriously.

Kate articulates what most viewers and filmmakers intrinsically accept as a key principle of filmmaking and popular entertainment: the leading character(s) should be relatively physically attractive. Despite the concern over providing realistic portrayals in all genres of film, the medium is fundamentally unrealistic in this sense, and every key member of the filmmaking team – from the casting director the cinematographer to the hairstylist to the editor – works diligently to portray leading characters in the most flattering manner possible. This complicates discussions of accurate representations of *types* in cinema, as in nearly every professor film since the 1920’s, the professor is either an easily

recognizable star (Robin Williams in *Good Will Hunting*, Eddie Murphy in *The Nutty Professor*) or an attractive actor with what is often euphemistically called “star appeal” (Julianne Moore in *Still Alice*, Ralph Fiennes in *Quiz Show*). Notable exceptions to this often unspoken rule are usually observed in smaller, independent or art-house films such as *The Squid and the Whale*, which stars Jeff Daniels, or *The Savages*, featuring Philip Seymour Hoffman – neither of whom are known for “heartthrob” roles. Kate suggests that this aesthetic applied to the leading male of *Master Class* as well, but that her clothing decisions primarily sprang from a sense of his individual character: “he's an offbeat guy...but, I don't want him to ever look sloppy... because he still has pride in what he does but I really don't want him to look totally pulled together because he's not that guy either.”

Throughout the preproduction and production process, all three of these filmmakers said they attempted to balance the realistic and the idealized in a way that fit the demands of the story, audience expectations, and their own personal feelings about collegiate spaces and personnel.

### **Differences between Reality and Film: The Realistic and Cinematic**

As mentioned earlier, Noel said that comedies such as *Master Class* are especially difficult to make, as the filmmakers need to create both a believable and a highly stylized world for the screen. Unlike stereotypical slapstick college comedies like *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), nuanced comedies rely on realism:

...because you're trying to do the two things, you're trying to keep it realistic, but you're also trying to keep it really funny, and those two things often don't go

together. So I think, from a filmmaking standpoint, I'm always going for real.

Real characters, real looks, real situations. I think they're funnier.

Lila also spoke about balancing realism and style, claiming that the “quintessential charming small liberal arts college” world they created for the film was juxtaposed with the more pedestrian scenic elements surrounding the lead character. For example, his apartment was a modest “bachelor pad,” and his car was old and a bit run-down. To underscore the contrast, Kate made sure that his blazer was slightly worn and his shirts and pants were simple and untailored. Both Lila and Kate said they often strive to make their work believable, but that at times, creating an idealized cinematic portrait is tempting. Lila said that she errs on the stylized side of the spectrum:

I'm definitely...more [interested] in the cinematic...style over substance...if it's gonna look a little bit better on camera, or if it's...a more beautiful backdrop in general, I definitely always lean that way over authenticity for better for worse...I'm definitely in the camp of 'let's go for the one that looks best,' and then I'll do what I can, as much as I can, with décor, with some touches to try to help bring it down, or bring it up, whichever direction it would need to go.

She adds that in reality, people will often live above or below their economic means, and that setting is not always a reliable indication of social position or financial status. For example, she has friends who now work as professors, and she sees a great deal of variety among their living spaces – some put their money into housing, while some have other interests or obligations that demand their financial attention. Furthermore, she says that a person's profession only accounts for a small portion of their characterization, and that

things like hobbies, family history, and personal tastes can influence their selected and personally created domestic environment.

In creating believable professor characters, Kate also downplayed the role of professional or economic success. She says that changes to the American economy and higher education have affected how she would approach character design. These days, she stated, Americans may have several different careers in their lifetime, and the appearances and surroundings of real-life professors would reflect the variety of their own previous experiences. Additionally, she said that colleges now enroll more non-traditional students and older students embarking on second or third careers, which could cause some professors to dress differently than they would for a more traditionally aged group of students. Furthermore, she said that an aging academic workforce means older professors in the classroom, and that older instructors use clothing differently than their younger peers:

I think when you're a young teacher...you want to come in there and have a commanding presence, and when you get a little bit older maybe you do it with your clothing and not so much with your voice and your demeanor.

This approach informed her work in *Master Class*, as Kate had to design costumes for a number of faculty characters of different ages, genders, ethnicities and character backgrounds. In terms of realism, she said she likes to work with directors who share her dedication to verisimilitude. However, she said that at times the script, film, or character will call for a bit of “cinematic glamour” that the costume designer will have to “justify” in some way. Oftentimes, the designer will tell the director that an expensive article of clothing or piece of jewelry was a luxury that the character permitted for herself, or that it

was a gift, or inherited. Kate said that sometimes a costume designer will indulge a personal whim: “I do always try to [include] what's appropriate, what can somebody afford...[but] you can always find a justification for something you love and you want to put on screen.” For both Kate and Lila, design is a balancing act – Kate calls it a “dance” – between the stylized and the realistic, and they say that this resembles real-life. Humans of the same profession and educational background are heterogeneous in a number of ways, and that this variety can exist alongside some archetypal similarities that define the nature of the work.

### **Why College?**

In addition to the fact that he enjoyed his own college experience and that he identified in some ways with a college professor leading character, Noel said that filmmakers might be drawn to write about college and college professors for a number of reasons:

College is a place where you can really explore ideas freely, and figure out what you want to do, and who you are, and in a way it's sort of the first time in your life that you actually have that kind of freedom. So, I think college resonates really deeply with a lot of writers, creative people...I mean, a lot of people in general, but creative people who go into filmmaking and journalism and things like that.

Noel also said that the academy is a unique world, as it contains a number of people from a variety of academic backgrounds. This variety allows filmmakers a number of storytelling opportunities not available in many professions. Lila had a similar take, claiming that “interesting,” “multi-dimensional” characters naturally appear in an environment with several diverse and overlapping concentrations of study.



Furthermore, both she and Kate suggested that college professors are traditionally well respected, and that some storytellers might be attracted to writing about characters that could have immense influence over young people at such a critical juncture in their lives. According to Kate, college instructors are capable of changing student's lives in a very short time, and the fact that they've "chosen the path of sort of chatting to the next few generations and enlightening them" makes this a powerful profession, worthy of depiction. Lila expressed similar sentiments, and added that filmmakers could be compelled to capture what is an intellectual and emotional rite of passage for so many:

I think academia is where [you] really ask people [students] to think in really open-minded ways, and maybe be open to new things they haven't considered before, or consider alternative theories. And I do think academia does that. Which is a great thing.

### **Stereotypes**

These filmmakers expressed a great deal of admiration for the academic profession and said they were careful to portray the college professor characters in *Master Class* in a thoughtful manner. However, they also discussed the propensity of cinema to use stereotypes and feature stereotypical characters – especially in certain genres. Noel said that he did not consciously intend to traffic in stereotypes when making the film:

I certainly was not going for any kind of negative stereotypes. Although, I know just from reading some reviews some academics have written about my film, I definitely hit some of those...It was maybe something, that in hindsight, I probably could have avoided...Some of the other characters, like the Dean, I think

are kind of a little more *stock*, and going back...I would have directed them in a different way to change their performance a little bit more to make them less stereotypical, but I certainly was not going for that in any way.

Noel added that making a comedy without falling into character clichés can be especially difficult, but that having a “kooky” character from any profession can be construed in a number of ways, depending on the type of film and audience member. For example, when he watches films for his own enjoyment, stereotypical characters annoy and distract him. However, if the film is a slapstick comedy, “total goofball escapism fun,” he can ignore them and just enjoy the movie. He adds that general audience members seeking escapist entertainment are not going to notice stereotypes as much as more critical viewers. Lila suggests that some cinematic stereotypes serve a legitimate narrative function, and that the efficiency of such representations makes them appealing for filmmakers who need to connect quickly with the audience. She said that the filmmaker wants to be sure that a character “reads” with the audience, and that stereotypes can be a “quick read.” Lila added that such oversimplifications are a “shorthand” or “signal” that filmmakers use to be sure that they’re “hitting the nail on the head” with a variety of audience members. In addition to establishing an emotional connection with the audience member, and creating a realistic depiction of the real world, filmmakers must contend with the film marketplace during production and postproduction.

### **The Marketplace**

Noel discussed the pressures filmmakers face in the contemporary film market and how non-production personnel can influence the depiction of characters. For *Master Class*, he was glad that he had worked with independent financial backers, because these

investors had less power to dictate the contents of the film than a studio would have. However, he said he knew that his investors would have preferred that he make a very different kind of film – one that had more physical comedy. They wanted it to be “broader, funnier, or sexier.” Noel knew he was not alone. He said that “every time you make a film, you’re battling with the market,” and that some filmmakers are more successful than others at staying true to their original vision. The struggle to write, direct, or produce marketable independent projects is deepening in a quickly changing marketplace that favors big stars and superhero movies.

As Noel is still writing, pitching, and selling original screenplays in Hollywood, his finger remains on the pulse of the industry, and he has seen dramatic changes over the past several years. For example, he says that studios are looking for “more complex fare” than they were a decade ago, which makes it more difficult to sell a straightforward, lighthearted comedy like *Master Class*. Additionally, he said that it is difficult to secure funding or studio support for any type of film that does not feature a well-known movie star. Noel said that after the market crash of 2008, studios and investors are reluctant to take a chance on productions that star lesser-known actors. Additionally, he cites the recent emergence of popular cable TV episodic productions, online delivery of studio films, and original content created by outlets like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, as challenges to the status quo. This is good news for some filmmakers; independent projects have found new opportunities to garner audiences through online platforms. However, Hollywood is making fewer films and less profit overall, which is not good for the film industry as a whole. Noel said that these economic changes have had a great influence on the types of films being produced and distributed, which influences the

depictions of characters such as college professors:

I feel like the more ‘studio’ you get, you get characters like [*The DaVinci Code* and *Indiana Jones*], who are probably not all that realistic...but then if you go more independent, those films tend to be more realistic. So you have *The Visitor*, and you have *The Squid and The Whale*, and movies like that, so I tend to think those types of movies do a decent to good job of portraying intellectuals. But usually, those movies are not as widely seen as the *DaVinci Code*. So it's... [a] dilemma...how do you get your movies seen? You write *DaVinci Code*.

Thus, the screenwriter and director are compelled to produce fare that is less realistic and features a lot of action, so that it will be appealing to a large audience. This is counter-intuitive to Noel. He sees contemporary audiences as discerning and thoughtful viewers who truly want more challenging and complex entertainment. He believes this explains why cable TV has seen recent success with nuanced and complex shows like *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Game of Thrones* (2011- ): “audiences have become way more sophisticated, and you can't get away with the sort of flowery, blah stuff anymore, you have to go deep.” Lila agrees, and says she has seen changes in American audiences’ tastes since the early 1990’s, when “edgy” and “interesting” cinematic projects helmed by new directors were very popular. She cites the mainstream success of recent productions like *Arrival* as a sign that studios are opening up to the idea of increasing complexity and darker themes in their releases:

...maybe tastes are growing a little bit...I think European films are brilliant...they're not afraid to be authentic or alternative, and I think America is maybe starting...to follow that a little bit, look to that a little bit. And become a

little bit braver...maybe we have room for filmmakers like Denis Villeneuve [the director of *Arrival*].

Lila adds that increasing thematic complexity in contemporary cinema has been quickened by digital delivery via the internet. Niche filmmakers with unusual visions and strong voices can attract and maintain a sizable following without ever having had much mainstream studio support. Lila says that this has allowed “vibrant” stories and characters to be seen by larger audiences in venues outside of the massive theatrical blockbuster system.

Similarly, Kate said that today’s film marketplace is further complicated by the poor financial returns on small, character-driven studio-backed films: “there are some fantastic films that just nobody goes to see.” She said that studio executives see these poor box office performances and believe that no one is interested in these types of films, which makes them reluctant to finance or distribute them. Furthermore, like Lila and Noel, she said that changes in viewing habits have had a significant impact on the industry. Young people are streaming films on demand, rather than going to the theaters, and that even adults like her (who work in the film industry) are too busy to see films in the theater. She added that digital technologies make it easy for viewers to delay watching a new release, which severely diminishes the bottom line for the studios, which make more money from theatrical first-runs than from digital delivery.

In general, Noel, Lila, and Kate’s observations suggest a film industry and marketplace in which it is extremely difficult to secure studio funding and theatrical distribution for films that present realistic depictions of college professors. Further, the changes in technology, delivery, and public viewing habits have challenged traditionally

profitable Hollywood products, which have resulted in more uncertainty about which types of films will receive studio support or get produced. These various market trends and the resulting audience-centric concerns among filmmakers have arguably affected the creation of on-screen characters of any profession. As recent developments in availability of content and viewer expectations have presented new opportunities and challenges for producers and distributors, the unwritten contract between the *makers* and *users* continues to be honored. As cinematic offerings become more diverse and specialized for niche markets of *users* through a number of viewing channels, perhaps more complex and realistic depictions of academicians will be created by *makers* targeting more sophisticated *users*. On the other hand, perhaps the near ubiquity of the college experience for Americans will provide more “stock” representations of professor characters to audiences that rely on narratively efficient stereotypes. At any rate, it is likely that *makers* – and their interpretive communities - will continue to be influenced by the marketplace when viewing, conceiving, and shaping their cinematic characters.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

From Umphlett to Conklin and Reynolds, the relationship between film and higher education has been discussed from the perspective of the viewer, the educator, and the historian. This project sought to consider this relationship from the filmmaker’s point of view. The findings reveal a number of factors that affected the choices these filmmakers made in constructing the college professor characters for *Master Class*, and provide responses to the research questions posed earlier. The first question asked how filmmakers’ conceptions of higher education and professors inform their decisions during the filmmaking/screenwriting process. The second research question asked how

filmmakers' own collegiate experiences contribute to the representations of faculty they construct in their film. The interview responses revealed quite a bit of overlap between these two questions. Two of the respondents' conceptions of college faculty and higher education in general were shaped primarily by their personal collegiate experiences, which in turn influenced their creative decisions during the making of *Master Class*.

Noel and Kate were deeply affected by university life. Noel was so inspired by his experience that he decided to not only write and direct, but also assist in securing funding for a feature film with a college professor as the leading character – an expensive, demanding, and risky enterprise, no matter the subject. He expressed a great amount of affection for his years in college, and he was especially fond of the learning environment offered both in and outside of the classroom. Throughout the interview, it became clear that Noel loved the university physical setting as well. For example, once he began production, his admiration for the photogenic college campus influenced his decision to film at an attractive campus, rather than the “second-rate,” dilapidated institution envisioned in his original screenplay. Noel's fascination with the academic profession and respect for his own professors contributed to his interest in depicting realistic professor characters in a sympathetic way, despite the fact that he was making a comedy. Kate was similarly inspired by her college experience, and said that she observed a lot of variation in professor personality types, appearances, and wardrobe choices as an undergraduate. Her interpersonal interactions with a variety of academics from various disciplines inspired her costume designs for *Master Class*, leading her away from stereotypical or highly stylized presentations and toward the realistic. Lila's design choices, however, were not significantly influenced by her university days. Instead,

family contacts and other films shaped her conceptions and expectations of college professors. Lila developed a very specific view on the academic profession and the spaces academics inhabit through visits to her stepmother's campus offices, her home office, and her friend's houses and apartments. All of the team members professed admiration for the profession, but did not say that this influenced their creative work.

These various experiences shaped the conceptions of the individual *makers*, resulting in a specific rendering of fictional professors and a campus that reflected the vision of their interpretive community – a vision mediated by shared social positions and accompanying cultural norms. While the foundational vision for the film came from the screenplay and the mind of the director, Noel, the final presentation of the characters and setting was influenced by the individuals' real life experiences and conceptions of college and faculty. These experiences were similar; all three *makers* attended highly selective, expensive, academically rigorous colleges with long histories, traditional architecture, acclaimed faculty, and celebrated alumni. As suggested by Fish and Becker, these individual *makers* adopted specific interpretive strategies from a larger, institutionalized community, which in turn informed their collective conceptions. Their work on this film resembled the commonly observed cinematic American version of higher education that emphasizes notions of traditional, Northeastern, selective, and elite colleges,

The third research question was concerned with influences beyond individual collegiate experiences: how were the filmmaker's depictions of faculty and faculty life affected by other factors? The interview responses revealed four basic influences. First, the team members' ideas for the cinematic college world of *Master Class* were formed both by research, and the conditions of the selected filming location. Prior to production



and after reading the screenplay, the team entered the research phase, which is common in preproduction. Kate visited college campuses close to her home and observed professors as they moved around campus, while Lila and Noel viewed previously released films about college professors. All of them were significantly influenced by previous college films, especially *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and *The Wonder Boys* (2000). These films' highly stylized depictions of old, traditional campuses, classrooms, and offices inspired the team to create a romanticized version of a university for *Master Class*. Many of their creative decisions also depended on the selected filming location and time of year. Once Noel had decided to film at a small, liberal arts university with a traditional architecture and design, he and Lila selected rooms and offices that best fit the needs of the screenplay, as well as those that supported an idealized, nostalgic university look. Similarly, Kate worked within the constraints of the setting's climate and region. The campus was in a suburban area outside of a large northeastern coastal city, and filming in the fall season placed additional constraints on her wardrobe design. Thus, the tendency to value traditional, idealized images of collegiate life and faculty was bolstered by other college films that contained similar depictions, along with the crew's exposure to comparable real-life campuses during the research phase.

Second, the team said that their desire to connect quickly with the audience compelled them to consider popular public conceptions about university life and college professors, and to consider how certain conventions would expedite the process. Noel was emphatic about his desire to avoid using blatant professor stereotypes in the film, saying that to use them would be lazy and inaccurate. However, he admitted that he could have done more to avoid "stock" characterizations in some of the secondary characters.

Both he and Lila suggested that a comedy like *Master Class* depends, to a minor extent, on using standardized characterizations as a way of connecting with a general audience that may not know much about professors or college in general. Kate claimed that real life professors do, in fact, tend to sport a uniform of sorts – one that serves a practical function in the workplace, but also transmits messages about self-identity to the rest of society. Here, the community of makers is negotiating strategies for connection with the community of users that are moderated by audience expectations and the type (or genre) of film being produced.

Third, the team discussed how the unique demands of the film marketplace affected their work on *Master Class*. Noel, as the director, had the most experience with these external pressures. He had to contend with the film's private investors, who often attempted to get him to change the tone of the film, even during the final phases of postproduction. Various stakeholders wanted him to make the characters more flamboyant and the comedy more ostentatious. Furthermore, he had struggled with greater market pressures as early as the screenwriting phase. While writing, he knew that securing funding and distribution for a nuanced comedy about a college professor was going to be difficult, especially at a time when Hollywood was banking on the success of large blockbusters and slapstick comedies with wide public appeal and an A-list starring actor. Additionally, Noel recognized that he was making a small film for a niche audience, one that would depend upon critical notice for success, rather than large box office returns. He, Kate, and Lila discussed the difficulty of making any independent project in a film marketplace that has become increasingly complex, shaken by quick development of new technologies and dwindling profits across the board. Despite these

difficulties, Noel and his team remained true to their realistic, sympathetic depictions and subdued comedic narrative. On this topic, the community articulated their dedication to the original screenplay its basic dramatic concept. Ultimately, they claimed that character depictions must meet the emotional, social, and physical journeys of the particular characters within the film, rather than catering to market pressures or cultural expectations surrounding a certain professional “type.” It seemed that for them, the primary aims were to create realistic, sympathetic characters with which audiences could easily respond, tell a story with a coherent dramatic arc, and to generate the desired emotional response.

Finally, while *Master Class* presents a wide range of college professor characters – some negative, some positive – the film’s leading character is undoubtedly a heroic protagonist in the classical, comedic sense. Although he makes several mistakes throughout the story, his affable, “everyman” demeanor inspires sympathy, and the audience is encouraged to admire him as he shows kindness to his students and co-workers. While many observers and scholars have expressed concerns about recent worsening depictions of college professors in films, the evidence for such a trend is incomplete. Moreover, this case study presents a glimpse into the embodiment and presentation of cinematic professor characters by a group of experienced film professionals. While their experiences and the resulting film cannot be generalized to other projects or other filmmakers, their work followed a traditional process that can be observed in most productions.

Overall, the respondents reported a complex range of personal, social, and cultural influences on their constructions of the characters, wardrobes, and settings for *Master*

*Class*. Educational backgrounds, personal experiences, previous films, audience expectations, social conventions, stereotypes, genre conventions, market pressures, and story elements contributed to their communal creative process. When considering Fish and Becker, one could argue that this interpretive community of *makers* had been conditioned to employ certain approaches in their creation of fictionalized college faculty. For example, their consumption of previously released films like *Good Will Hunting* and *The Wonder Boys* and the ensuing popular discourse surrounding those titles appears to have exerted a significant influence on their artistic and technical work on *Master Class*. Moreover, during their research and location scouting for the film, they selected campus settings similar to both those commonly seen in other college films and in their own collegiate experiences. Thus, they may have been drawn toward specific codes that signaled a shared conception of social reality while also recognizing that such representational content could be quickly and easily understood by a wide variety of users. In seeking the efficient delivery of a narrative about this shared reality, the makers also had to navigate the systemic cultural attitudes and expectations of higher education and college professors among their *users* and the greater interpretive community of American culture at the time of the film's release. Further, the filmmakers - especially Noel - had to navigate the demands coming from the film's financiers and distributors - another kind of interpretive community.

This case study reveals the complexity inherent in the creation of fictionalized, cinematic college professor characters, as well as the influence of structural forces on filmmakers who craft such representations. Throughout the production process, this group of *makers* had to reconcile their own experiences, conceptions, and artistic

intentions with the expectations of users. The team members also negotiated with each other, the screenplay, and the financiers. This process challenges the auteurist ideal in favor of a collaborative approach to production – one that is informed by the experiences and attitudes and expectations of several individuals. Further, the work of this team also questions the implication that individual filmmakers intentionally create stereotypical or negative cinematic representations of college professors to denigrate the professoriate and higher education. As suggested by Becker, the creation of representations of social reality depends upon the use of shared cultural codes. These standardized signals can lead to distortions and reductions of reality, at times, despite the makers' stated intentions to eschew reductive summaries such as stereotypes. Becker's choice to write about film production when discussing representations of social phenomenon suggests an acknowledgement of how such a collaborative medium is susceptible to standardized cultural conventions – “shortcuts.” When discussing the popular discourse surrounding fictionalized projections of higher education faculty, observers should continue to consider how those texts are constructed by makers, rather than solely focusing on how they may be received by users. In motion pictures, the propensity for efficiency in audience comprehension often outweighs innovation in representation. In this case, these techniques created a film that still reverberates with traditional, romanticized conceptions, recalling an erudite and elite status quo. The stories society tells itself about college and professors on movie screens are mediated by a number of factors, and while they may or may not reflect or shape dominant cultural attitudes, they continue to present familiar images.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study**

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of the interview respondents. Even though the case study documented the experiences of three key crewmembers on *Master Class*, additional interviews with the film editor, producer, or cinematographer would have provided a more comprehensive exploration of this interpretive community and the creative team. Since these additional participants were not available, follow-up interviews with the three original participants may have garnered useful responses on relevant but unexplored topics, such as their thoughts on the current state of higher education and how that would shape their creative work (however, in this case, the interview respondents said their schedules did not permit second interviews). Additionally, interviews with the creative teams of two separate college professor films would have provided opportunities for comparison between the two teams and the two professor films, which may have enabled a deeper exploration of the various interpretive and creative processes in use. Unfortunately, personnel from another professor film were not available or did not respond to the request for interviews. Future efforts would need to account for the obstacles in securing interview time with working film professionals.

As demonstrated through this case study, higher education researchers and film scholars have many opportunities for future study on how filmmakers shape cinematic depictions of university. Through an examination of the various social and cultural factors that influence filmmakers' creative decisions – such as social position, race, and gender - scholars may learn more about how interpretive communities of *makers* may inadvertently or unintentionally reproduce traditional representations of higher education and reproduce stereotypes about college professors. Alternately, researchers could

examine how filmmakers address specific cultural archetypes surrounding faculty and how these differ from stereotypes. Further studies could also focus on the unique tensions faced by filmmakers of education-based narratives when approximating reality in an expensive medium dominated by a market-driven system of distribution. Overall, future study of the intersection between creative work and shared conceptions of higher education could inform new dialogues about the evolving role, public appearance, and function of college faculty and the institutions that employ them.

## SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

These three manuscripts have sought to address three basic questions about representations of college professors on screen. First, how have negative depictions of college professors in college professor films changed over the past five decades? Second, how do real-life film professors respond to cinematic depictions of college professors? Third, how do filmmakers construct depictions of college professors in a college professor film?

Relying on a sample of American films that have featured college professor characters in leading or lead supporting roles since 1970, the first manuscript focused on various formal aspects of the selected films that might indicate worsening negativity surrounding the professoriate. After the analysis of twenty-five college professor films over five decades, I found that the type of negativity associated with professor characters in the sample had changed. For example, recent professor characters in the sample have become more prone to emotional, psychological, and physical afflictions when compared to characters from previous decades. A number of structural factors may have contributed to these changing depictions over the years, including market forces, changing audience tastes and attitudes, increases in cinematic offerings through alternative distribution channels, improvements in digital technology, and improved access to a variety of cinematic content. However, changes to these depictions appear to coincide with increasing public skepticism and criticism of a higher educational system beset by a number of liabilities, including increases in tuitions and student fees, and a large national student debt load. Moreover, the films in this sample are gathered from a politically conservative time period in American history, and the contemporaneous rise in neoliberal



policies surrounding the financial support and operations of public education may have affected some of the depictions (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

The second paper investigated responses from interviews with university film professors from across the nation that represented several types of institutions and academic ranks. I suggest that the respondents constituted a type of interpretive community that was conditioned by cultural forces and thus compelled to articulate interpretations of college professor films that converged around understandings shared by the group. These film professors' readings of cinematic texts were shaped in various ways and by a number of factors, such as their individual experiences as undergraduate students and college professors, their families' attitudes toward higher education, social and cultural conceptions of college, and popular culture texts such as films and television shows. While their individual conceptions of both real-life and cinematic college professors varied, along with their individual backgrounds, their responses converged around several themes: the general public has a negative view of professors, a number of negative stereotypes surround professors, cinematic professors are presented as both negative and positive figures, most real life college professors are well-intentioned professionals and educators, and they enjoy their own jobs. Additionally, most of the subjects said that on-screen depictions of professors were unrealistic and conformed to a number of stereotypes about the gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity of faculty. Several also claimed that such depictions are becoming more negative or "dark" in nature, along with depictions of individuals from all professions. Many respondents suggest that this may not signal public dissatisfaction with academicians, but rather that effective drama needs flawed characters.

The third paper examined cinematic college professors from the viewpoint of the filmmaker by completing a case study of a recently produced college professor film. Interviews with the screenwriter/director, production designer, and costume designer of the pseudonymously titled *Master Class* investigated how the work of these film professionals was influenced by a number of factors, including their own experiences in higher education, their personal conceptions of college professors, previously viewed college-themed films, and existing stereotypes about professors. Like the real life film professors in the previous paper, I conceived of this team as an interpretive community whose work on *Master Class* was largely shaped by shared social, professional, and cultural experiences. Their collective conception of the prototypical liberal arts college seemed to be informed by a traditional, commonly observed cinematic template – one that reflected their own collegiate experiences. However, the team members pointed to a number of factors that influenced their creative decisions in making the film and creating their on-screen campus and professor characters, including their research of real-life college campuses in the American Northeast, and previously produced college professor films. They also spoke of the dramatic and comedic needs of the script, their direct interactions with the selected campus filming location, and the time of year during filming. Finally, their desire to connect “quickly” with a demographically diverse audience, and the unique demands of the film marketplace at the time of the film’s release and production also affected their work. Thus, the team members were influenced by a range of cultural, social, personal, economic, and practical factors in their construction of the film’s settings, wardrobes, and performances. It appears that making a college professor film and depicting professor characters may be a process significantly

informed by standardized cultural conventions, personal experiences, and a preference for narrative efficiency in communicating with audiences.

These three manuscripts suggest that the changing appearance of college professors in films over time may be the result of complex intersections of various social phenomena. In contrast to the suggestion that negative depictions of cinematic academicians simply reflect public dissatisfaction with the profession and with higher education in general (Williams, 2010; DiPaolo, 2015; Craft, 2012), this project reveals a somewhat byzantine process that is endemic to American film development, production, distribution, and reception. This process is one in which a handful of individuals labor under the scrutiny of investors, studio executives and other stakeholders to shape a screenplay-based narrative. The resulting film is intended to succeed both commercially and artistically with an increasingly segmented international viewing audience and a community of influential film critics. Locating the direct influence of a general audience's attitudes and expectations on such a process is difficult. I suggest that a number of variables shape the decisions made by a filmmaking team, as an interpretive community, during all phases of production.

Assertions that negative cinematic representations of college professors belie public dissatisfaction are not supported in either the interviews with film professors or with the filmmakers of *Master Class*. This is not to question nascent research that indicates general disapproval of academia in the U.S., nor to contest claims of widespread and longstanding anti-intellectual sentiment among the populace (Skoble, 2001; Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017b). Rather, I suggest that college professor films may directly reflect the attitudes and experiences of small groups of filmmakers. These

attitudes have been shaped by previous cinematic texts, personal experiences, and conceptions of the filmmaker's social groups. Given the homogenous demographic composition of American filmmakers in general, many of these groups may resemble the *Master Class* team; primarily white, middle to upper middle class, and college educated. However, they don't operate in a vacuum. Throughout all phases of production, the filmmakers' work is moderated by stakeholders such as studio executives, financial investors, ratings' boards members, and test audiences. Yet, the filmmakers' attitudes toward academia may be predominantly influenced by their interpretive community, rather than contemporaneous public attitudes and pressures from other groups.

Furthermore, the assertion that filmic depictions of college professors have always been disproportionately negative, and are growing worse over time seems overly simplistic. The reappearance of professorial archetypes and the reproduction of collegiate stereotypes on screen may be directly related to the shared conceptions of the filmmakers, the unique demands of the creative filmmaking process, and the shared, symbolic language employed by both filmmakers and film users. However, professorial depictions do seem to be changing, and they appear to have grown more negative and complex, especially in their presentation of the type of suffering the protagonists endure. For example, professors in films from the 2000's and 2010's suffer from grief, depression, dementia, existential angst, and other emotional and physical troubles. In contrast, most leading professor characters from other decades are generally spared from such conditions. Yet, contemporary professors characters are relatively free of the physical violence and anti-social behavior that accompanies faculty characters in the early portion of the sample.

It is important to note that the sample films analyzed in the first portion of this project were produced during a period of increasing conservative influence on national, state, and regional policy making in the United States. The beginning of this relatively recent trend is commonly marked by the installation of the Reagan administration. Since 1980, this increasing conservatism has been accompanied by a rise in neoliberal policies that have transformed the financial operations and academic profiles of institutions across the nation. By the 1970's, the large World War II-era increase in federally funded academic research had begun to wane. Continuing to face deep cuts to funding from both federal and state bodies, many public universities have drastically raised tuitions while partnering with corporate interests to generate additional income through grants, patents, and public-private campus partnerships (Schulze-Cleven & Olson, 2017; Hoffman, 2012). The mounting corporatization of college campuses has proven to be a challenge to traditional collegiate ideals such as academic freedom, tenure, shared governance, and the liberal arts – ideals that have protected faculty and academics for centuries.

Seeking to attract more students and tuition dollars by promising an easy path to gainful employment upon graduation, many universities have turned toward more “professional,” practical, work-ready instruction, while cutting traditional academic programs (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Additionally, more U.S. public institutions have increasingly relied on contingent, non-tenured faculty for instruction. Attracted by the ability to easily and quickly shed faculty during difficult financial times, universities have continued to degrade tenured and tenure-track rolls (Shulman, et. al., 2017). Simultaneously, administrative and student-centered staff rolls and incomes have increased (Ginsburg, 2011; Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). As a result, many aspiring

and working college professors operate within an unstable market and hold increasingly insecure positions. Tenure is being challenged at universities across the country, and faculty salaries have stagnated. All of these factors have contributed to a great amount of anxiety among the professoriate (Barnshaw & Dunietz, 2015). This escalating anxiety may have inspired the recently darkening mental and psychological conditions of cinematic leading professor characters. There certainly is a coincidence, if not a correlation, between more depressed and angst-ridden professor characters and the worsening economic and social position of the real-life academic professional.

Further, I suggest that the film marketplace, the phenomenological viewing experience, and expectations of audiences have changed dramatically as well, which may have allowed and encouraged contemporary filmmakers to offer these “darker,” more emotionally complex characters. With a plethora of new digital viewing outlets and the ensuing creation of niche channels for a variety of viewers, the marketplace now presents opportunities for many filmmakers to create content that may not have been well received at the multiplex. In previous decades, studios and filmmakers were constrained by a theatrical model that favored films that often appealed to general audiences. Now, their work can be quickly and inexpensively marketed to global online audiences seeking a diverse content. Moreover, contemporary audiences may be more receptive to stories that detail psychological and cognitive challenges, and new production and exhibition technology may make telling such stories easier than in the past.

Overall, this project contributes to the existing film studies, film history, and higher education literature by conceiving of college films with leading professor characters as a kind of sub-genre, the *college professor film*. While Umphlett (1984) and

Conklin (2008) have catalogued appearances of professors in any type of on-screen role, this project only examined lead professor characters. This approach provided opportunities to explore how the professor protagonist – the main character and ostensibly the story’s hero – is constructed, conceived of, and received by filmmakers and film educators. This project also represents a seminal exploration on how formalist constructions of college professors have changed over several decades. This is a rarely explored aspect of the archetypal cinematic professor, yet this project documents how some filmmakers balance highly stylized and classical cinematic conventions in an attempt to approximate a realistic vision of higher education. Moreover, this project extends the consideration of interpretive communities in film reception and audience studies to include the filmmakers and film professors. Investigating these individuals as members of their own interpretive communities represents a novel approach to higher education films.

Finally, this project contributes to the existing literature on faculty. While some researchers have investigated how real-life college professors feel about their profession and career (Selingo, 2008; Wilson, 2012; Cassidy, 2005; Williams, 2010; Deresiewicz, 2007), their physical appearance (Blaikie, 2011; Fisanick, 2006), and how professors are depicted in films and television (Dittus, 2007; Hinton, 1991; Papke, 2003; Oliker, 1993), this project offers a new approach. First, this provides a formalist analysis of how professors in a leading role are presented on screen over time. Second, this documents the responses of faculty members who are in the process of reconciling their own experiences with cinematic representations and cultural expectations. Third, it provides a view of faculty examining their own profession in light of recent challenges to higher education

and changes in the entertainment industry. Fourth, it explores the attitudes of mass media content creators toward faculty and higher education. The combination of these four approaches provides a kind of triangulation that captures several viewpoints of cinematic and real life faculty at once.

By examining how various groups respond to cinematic representations of the academic profession and their conceptions of its appearance in the public imagination, this project provides a model for future exploration. Such an approach could be used to further investigate the intersection between popular culture, college faculty, and public attitudes toward higher education. A greater understanding of how these forces exert influence on creators and consumers of popular culture products may provide opportunities for understanding the public discourse surrounding higher education as a story that we tell each other through various media – one continually in flux, yet one that reverberates with traditional figures and spaces.



## APPENDIX A

### Film Sample By Decade (1970's-2010's)

#### 2010's

Larry Crowne (2011)  
Still Alice (2014)  
Tumbledown (2015)  
Arrival (2016)  
Inferno (2016)

#### 2000's

Kinsey (2004)  
The Squid and The Whale (2005)  
The DaVinci Code (2006)  
The Savages (2007)  
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (2008)

#### 1990's

Reversal of Fortune (1990)  
Husbands and Wives (1992)  
Quiz Show (1994)  
The Nutty Professor (1996)  
Good Will Hunting (1997)

#### 1980's

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)  
Lianna (1983)  
Ghostbusters (1984)  
Desert Hearts (1985)  
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989)

#### 1970's

Straw Dogs (1971)  
The Paper Chase (1973)  
The Gambler (1974)  
The Eiger Sanction (1975)  
Manhattan (1979)

Films with Professors as Lead or Lead-Supporting Characters (U.S. releases)

2010's

Arrival, 2016  
Inferno, 2016  
Regression, 2016  
Irrational Man, 2015  
Tumbledown, 2015  
The Rewrite, 2014  
Still Alice, 2014  
The Gambler, 2014  
The Sublime and Beautiful, 2014  
Larry Crowne, 2011

2000's

A Serious Man, 2009  
A Single Man, 2009  
Knowing, 2009  
Angels and Demons, 2009  
Flash of Genius, 2008  
Tenure, 2008  
The Visitor, 2008  
Smart People, 2008  
Elegy, 2008  
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, 2008  
21, 2008  
Stranger Than Fiction, 2006  
The Savages, 2007  
The Great Debaters, 2007  
88 Minutes, 2007  
The Reaping, 2007  
The DaVinci Code, 2006  
Proof, 2006  
The Squid and The Whale, 2005  
The Ladykillers, 2004  
We Don't Live Here Anymore, 2004  
Kinsey, 2004  
A Love Song for Bobby Long, 2004  
The Life of David Gale, 2003  
21 Grams, 2003  
Learning Curves, 2003  
Mona Lisa Smile, 2003  
Eden's Curve, 2003  
Drumline, 2002

Wit, 2001  
Evolution, 2001  
A Beautiful Mind, 2001  
Red Letters, 2000  
Wonder Boys, 2000

### 1990's

One True Thing, 1998  
Flubber, 1997  
Good Will Hunting, 1997  
The Nutty Professor, 1996  
The Mirror Has Two Faces, 1996  
Mind Games, 1996  
Chain Reaction, 1996  
Mind Games, 1996  
Just Cause, 1995  
Quiz Show, 1994  
Oleanna, 1994  
Surviving Desire, 1993  
The Pelican Brief, 1993  
Husbands and Wives, 1992  
Fisher King, 1991  
The Psychic, 1991  
Reversal of Fortune, 1990

### 1980's

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, 1989  
Arlington Road, 1989  
Dr. Alien, 1989  
Gross Anatomy, 1989  
Animal Behavior, 1989  
D.O.A., 1988  
Another Woman, 1988  
Prince of Darkness, 1987  
Sweet Liberty, 1986  
Boggy Creek II: and the Legend Continues, 1985  
Desert Hearts, 1985  
Clue, 1985  
Ghostbusters, 1984  
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, 1984  
They're Playing With Fire, 1984  
Interface, 1984  
Educating Rita, 1983  
Lianna, 1983

Doctor Detroit, 1983  
Time Walker, 1982  
Raiders of the Lost Ark, 1981  
Dirty Tricks, 1981  
Night School, 1981  
A Change of Seasons, 1980  
It's My Turn, 1980  
Witch's Brew, 1980

1970's

Lost and Found, 1979  
Manhattan, 1979  
The Eiger Sanction, 1975  
The Gambler, 1974  
The Paper Chase, 1973  
The Harrad Experiment, 1973  
Straw Dogs, 1971  
Adam at Six A.M., 1970  
How Do I Love Thee?, 1970  
R.P.M., 1970  
The End of the Road, 1970

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions - Film Faculty and On-Screen Representations of the Professoriate

1. How long have you been working in higher education?
2. Are you tenured, tenure-track, or a lecturer?
3. Do you have a terminal degree?
4. Do you work at a public or private institution?
5. Do you have professional film production experience outside of the classroom?
6. How familiar are you with the college professor films contained in the list I sent you?
7. Do any of the films stand out to you in terms of their depiction of college professors? Why?
8. Do you feel that any the films on this list present a negative depiction of college professors? If so, which ones?
9. Why do you feel that those depictions are negative? What makes a depiction negative?
10. How do you think the filmmakers constructed those depictions? What tools did they use?
11. If they were negative, why do you think the filmmakers released a negative depiction of college professors?
12. Do you feel that our culture has a negative view of real-life college professors? Why or why not?
13. Do you think that the cinematic depictions of college professors have grown more negative in recent decades (since the 1970's)? Why or why not?
14. Why did you choose to become a college professor?
15. Why did you choose to teach film?
16. How were you influenced in your life – if at all – by social/cultural views on college professors?
17. How were you influenced – if at all – by mass media representations (like film and television) of college professors?
18. Do you think that these same forces influence the view of the general public toward college professors? Why or why not?
19. How similar are these presentations (films) to your experience of real-life academia?
20. How similar are these presentations (films) to your conception of yourself as a college professor? Do you think you fit into these types/stereotypes/archetypes?

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student-faculty interaction. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 61(4), 529.

## VITA

John C. Fitch III

### EDUCATION

#### **MFA in Film and Video**

Savannah College of Art and Design

#### **BA in Broadcast Communications: Video Production**

Asbury College

### ACADEMIC/TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2016 – present **Professor**

*Eastern Kentucky University*

2011 – 2016 **Associate Professor**

*Eastern Kentucky University*

2005 – 2010 **Assistant Professor**

*Eastern Kentucky University*

2003 - 2005 **Assistant Professor of TV, Film and Video**

*Johnson C. Smith University*

2003 - 2005 **Instructor of Digital Film Production**

*The Light Factory, Charlotte, N.C.*

2004 **Instructor and Team Leader**

*Vermont Arts Institute, Lyndonville, VT*

2003 **Instructor of Video and TV Production**

*The Bethesda Comcast Alliance, Savannah, GA*

2002-2003 **Teaching Assistant**

*Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA*

### PUBLICATIONS

Schmuldt, L., Gentile, T., Bluemlein, J., Fitch, III, J., Sterner, W., Graham, A. (2012).  
The War Within: One Soldier's Experience; Several Clinician's Perspectives. *Journal of  
Military and Government Counseling. 1 (1)*, 2-18.



Rudick, L., & Fitch, J., III, (2012). The Relationship Between Measures of Spiritual Well-Being and Communication Apprehension: A Pilot Study. *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 1(4), 75-88.

Fitch, J., III, DiGirolamo, J., & Schmuldt, L. (2012). The Efficacy of Primordial Energy Activation and Transcendence to Address Public Speaking Anxiety: a Pilot Protocol. *Journal of Energy Psychology*, 3(2), 41-52.

Fitch, J., III, Schmuldt, L., & Rudick, K. (2011). Reducing State Communication Anxiety for Public Speakers: An Energy Psychology Pilot Study. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 6 (3), 178-192.

Fitch, J., III, (2005). Archetypes on Screen: Odysseus, St. Paul, Christ and the American Cinematic Hero and Anti-Hero. *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 9(1).

Fitch, J., III, (2004). Archetypes on the American Screen: Heroes and Anti-Heroes. *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 7.

## **JURIED PRESENTATIONS**

Schmuldt, L. M., Bluemlein, J., Fitch, J. (2017, November). "The War Within: Case Conceptualizations of a Soldier named J." Kentucky Counseling Association Conference, Louisville, KY.

Fitch, J. (2017, August). "Fish Out of Water: Social Class and the Cinematic Ivy League." University Film and Video Association annual conference, Los Angeles, CA.

Fitch, J., Givens, G., Emerine, J., Sterk, H. (2016, September) "Solutions to the Salary Inversion Problem: A Necessary Change for Kentucky Universities." Kentucky Communication Association annual conference, Bowling Green, KY.

Fitch, J. (2016, August). "Moral Injury and PTSD in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* and *Flags of our Fathers*." University Film and Video Association annual conference, Las Vegas, NV.

Fitch, J. (2016, August). "Bourdieu Goes to Hollywood: The Transmission of Cultural Capital in *Good Will Hunting*." University Film and Video Association annual conference, Las Vegas, NV.

Fitch, J. (2016, August). "The MFA in Film: Diminishing Returns?" University Film and Video Association annual conference, Las Vegas, NV. Part of panel: "Is a BFA or MFA Degree Right for Your Program?" Hackel, K., Smith, M.C., Fitch, J.

Fitch, J. (2015, August). "The MFA Degree in Film: Surveying Student Satisfaction." University Film and Video Association annual conference, Washington, D.C.

Fitch, J. (2014, April). "U.S. Film Exports to China and Glocalism: a Response to Cultural Imperialism?" Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference, Chicago, IL.

Schmuldt, L., Gentile, T., Fitch, J., III, Bluemlein, J., Sterner, W., Graham, A. (2013, October). "The War Within: Implementing Multiple Clinical Perspectives in Case Conceptualization." Association for Counselor Education and Supervision 2013 Conference, Denver, CO.

Schmuldt, L., Fitch, J., III, Gentile, T., Bluemlein, J., Sterner, W., Graham, A. (2013, March) "Veteran reintegration following multiple deployments: Theoretical Strategies for Working with our Soldiers." American Counseling Association's 2013 Conference, Cincinnati, OH.

Keltner-Previs, K., Givens, D., Fitch, J., III, Fairchild, J. (2012, September). "What Works, What Does Not: Teaching Online from Four Communication Discipline Perspectives." The Kentucky Communication Association Annual Conference, Carrollton, Ky.

Tillson, L., Fitch, J., III, Albert, L., & Johnson, K. (2011, September). "Empowering the Anxious to Use Their Voice." The Kentucky and Tennessee Communication Association Annual Conference, Cadiz, Ky.

Fitch, J., III, & Schmuldt, L. (2011, June). "The Efficacy of Primordial Energy Activation and Transcendence (PEAT) to Address Public Speaking Anxiety." The Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology's 13th Annual International Energy Psychology Conference, Reston, Va.

Rudick, K., & Fitch, J., III, (2011, May). "Podcasting: A Pilot Study of Student-Users' Views." The Ninth Annual International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, Athens, Greece.

Fitch, J., III, & Rudick, K. (2011, February). "Exploring the Relationship between Measures of Spiritual Well-Being and Communication Apprehension." The International Religion and Spirituality in Society Conference, Chicago, Ill.

Schmuldt, L., & Fitch, J., III, (2010, November). "Energy Psychology: Approaches and Applications in Counseling." The European Branch of the American Counseling Association's 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference, Heidelberg-Wiesloch, Germany.

Fitch, J., III, & Rudick, L. (2010, November). "Using Collaborative Podcasting to Address Communication Apprehension." Kentucky Convergence: Seventh Annual Conference on Technology in Education, Erlanger, Ky.

Fitch, J., III, & Rudick, K. (2010, May). "Strategies for Addressing Communication Apprehension in the Classroom." Kentucky Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Creativity and the Educated Person, Lexington, Ky.

Fitch, J., III, & Rudick, K. (2008, September). "Cooperative Learning: Theory, Practice and Filmmaking." The Kentucky and Tennessee Communication Association Conference, Burns, Tenn.

Rudick, K., & Fitch, J., III, (2008, September). "Filmmaking and Cooperative Learning: Where do you find the money to do the real thing?" The Kentucky and Tennessee Communication Association Conference, Burns, Tenn.

Cogdill, C., & Fitch, J., III, (2008, September). "A Triangulation of Filmmaking: Students' responses, behind-the-scenes footage, and film excerpts." The Kentucky and Tennessee Communication Association Conference, Burns, Tenn.

## **JURIED FILMS AND VIDEOS**

- 2016            **The Essential Eastern**, *documentary feature*. Production Consultant/Writing Consultant. Kentucky Educational Television; KET1, KET2, and The Kentucky Channel, Lexington, Ky. 2016-2017.
- 2015            **Off the Beaten Path**, *documentary*. Producer/Director/Editor. Official Selection, Louisville International Festival of Film, 2015.
- 2013            **Two Brothers**, *documentary*. Co-Producer/Co-Director. Grand Rapids Film Festival, 2013; Honorable Mention, Sunset Film Festival of Los Angeles, 2013; Kentucky Educational Television; KET1, KET2, and The Kentucky Channel, Lexington, Ky. 2013-2014.
- 2010            **Our Secret Season**, *short film*. Producer/Sound Designer. Pre-selected as a "Must See Film" at the Somewhat North of Boston (SNOB) Film Festival, 2010; El Capitan Award, Yosemite Film Festival, 2011; Macon Film Festival, 2011.
- 2008            **The Library**, *short film*. Director/Producer/Screenwriter/Editor/Sound Designer. Best Short Film Award, Cinefest Movie Expo and Festival, 2008; Vine Shorts Fest, 2008; "Reel Visions," Kentucky Educational Television, 2010.
- 2008            **The Tie**, *experimental micro-film*. Director/Producer/Screenwriter/Editor/Sound Designer.

“Reel Visions,” Kentucky Educational Television, 2009; The Short Film Channel, Movieola and Oaut Media, 2008; Reel Indie Films, 2008.

- 2007     **Dog te Ching**, *experimental micro-film*.  
Director/Videographer/Producer/Screenwriter/Editor/Sound Designer.  
Indie Fest USA Film Festival, Downtown Disney, 2008; Santa Fe  
Metaphysical Film Festival, 2008; “Second Cinema,” Time Warner Cable,  
Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, Carborro, Wilmington, Charlotte, Newport  
and Union County, N.C., 2008; “Reel Visions,” Kentucky Educational  
Television, 2010.
- 2006     **Just Yesterday**, *short film*. Director/Producer/Screenwriter/Editor/Sound  
Designer.  
“Second Cinema,” Time Warner Cable, Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill,  
Carrboro, Wilmington, Charlotte, Newport and Union County, N.C.,  
2007; Access and Excess Film Festival, 2007.
- 2005     **Among Brothers**, *feature film*. Associate Producer.  
Palm Beach International Film Festival; Los Angeles Dances with Films  
Festival; Worldfest Houston Film Festival; Atlanta Underground Film  
Festival; Kansas City International Film Festival; Bluegrass Independent  
Film Festival; California Independent Film Festival; Great Lakes  
Independent Film Festival; Big Bear Film Festival; Westwood  
International Film Festival; Indie Memphis Film Festival; Bahamas  
International Film Festival; Lexfest Film Festival.
- 2004     **Ma Chere Petite Maxyme**, *experimental short*. Producer/Sound  
Designer.  
Savannah Film Festival; North Carolina Visions, North Carolina Public  
Television; The Light Factory Carolina Filmmaker’s Showcase;  
Smogdance Film Festival; The Big Blue Sky Film Festival; Independent  
Film Showcase WCOX 15 Channel, Georgia; Big Bear Film Festival;  
Great Lakes Independent Film Festival; Arlene’s Grocery Picture Show;  
Johnson C. Smith University Lyceum.

## INVITED PRESENTATIONS AND WORKSHOPS

- 2018     Faculty Leadership Institute, Eastern Kentucky University.
- 2017     Technical Arts Roundtable Discussion, Sponsored by the Kentucky Film Office,  
the Kentucky Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts, Lexington,  
KY.
- 2016     “Salary Equity and Inversion” Kentucky State AAUP Conference, Northern  
Kentucky University.

- 2011 The Kentucky Film Educators Summit, presented by the Kentucky Film Commission at the Idea Festival, Louisville, KY.
- 2008 Kentucky State Legislature, Interim Joint Committee on Local Government, Louisville, KY.
- 2005 “Ma Chere Petite Maxyme,” John Fitch III, Chad Cogdill and Lisa Inserra, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, N.C.
- “Ma Chere Petite Maxyme,” John Fitch III, Chad Cogdill and Lisa Inserra, Johnson C. Smith University Lyceum Program Faculty Showcase, Charlotte, N.C.
- 2004 “Art and Science at the Crossroads,” Network Summer Faculty Enrichment Program, Faculty Resource Network, New York University, New York, N.Y.