

A Brief History of Hidden Scholars

(Note: Most of this information is embedded in the blog; this is a narrative summary.)

Year One: Meeting a Real Need

Hidden Scholars began in the summer of 2012. In July I contacted the independent scholars I knew, sent a press release to the local papers, and reserved a table at the Amherst Brewing Company. On the day of the meeting, I brought a book with me to the ABC, thinking that if nobody showed up I could at least spend a productive hour reading.

Fourteen people came to that initial meeting. They were adjunct faculty, scholars with unrelated "day jobs," academics who lived here because of their spouses' occupations but hadn't found jobs of their own, Ph.D.s trying to change disciplines, and more. Clearly, there were a lot of people out there who were engaged in scholarship outside the academy. And they needed each other's support.

I'd been thinking for some time about starting a group: I was researching my second book and doing adjunct work, and I wanted colleagues. The immediate impetus, though, was the founding of the Ronin Institute earlier that year. Because of this, I knew that there were other people with the same concerns as mine, others who were actively addressing the challenges and opportunities we faced, perhaps even the critical mass that might bring about real change.

I envisioned the group as a support group and as a kind of clearinghouse. I hoped that subgroups might form to address particular issues, such as grant funding or adjunct life. I hoped we might be able to discuss each other's work or develop a writing group. Above all, I hoped to end the isolation – to help people know who else was out there working in a basement or a back bedroom or a coffee shop, and to provide a means of contact.

A lot happened right away. Before the meeting, Nick Grabbe of the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* followed up on my press release with a very nice article. Then the web publication *Adjunct Nation* picked up Nick's article, and after that, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called us. Their article, featuring three local independent scholars, came out in January 2013.

Five Colleges, Inc., also took an interest. They were already sponsoring (and still do sponsor) a group called Five College Associates – active scholars who don't have permanent positions in any of the colleges but who are associated with them, according to specific criteria. They thought our two groups might collaborate on programming and networking. In January 2013, Five Colleges sponsored a joint reception for Associates and Hidden Scholars. It was well-attended, informative, and a lot of fun. We did it again the following October. FCI also set up a joint listserv, and they made room for independent scholars in their membership criteria. Their support has been very valuable.

Meanwhile, I worked on publicity and communication. I built up the blog and maintained a mailing list, sent notices to local events listings, and posted flyers in libraries and cafés. The posters in Frost Library at Amherst College, especially, brought in several interesting people.

We offered a number of programs. Members were wonderful about sharing their knowledge and expertise, as well as their deepest concerns. Our programs that first year were:

Tom Ernst: Opportunities for Earning outside Teaching

Neal Abraham: Resources and Networking Opportunities in the Five Colleges

Steve Guy: The Adjunct Situation

"Open mic" discussion on work in progress

A writers' group

Regular meetups for social gathering and mutual support

Year Two: Consolidating Gains

In the second year, we developed a little more public presence. At the recommendation of several members, I set up a Facebook page. In late summer, I was one of several panelists at an Amherst College community engagement program for first-year students. The Jones Library in Amherst invited us to give an evening presentation, a sampling of our research. This program brought in a great audience from the community. (I also proposed a "scholar-in-residence" program at the Jones, analogous to their "artist-in-residence" program, but they weren't interested. I still like the idea.)

But before that, I sent out a survey to everyone on the mailing list. The idea was to assess people's interests and to find out what they might be willing to do for the group. About half of the members responded, and, to put it briefly, the answers were all over the place. There's a summary in the blog. The greatest need, by a large margin, was for grant funding. A few people volunteered to help publicize our activities, although some of them were unable to follow through. Overall, it was good to assess where we stood.

Outreach continued. Over the summer I hired a student to compile a list of faculty members and department chairs in eighteen colleges and universities in the region. It was a sizable task, and she did a great job. Then I sent out an e-mail blast with some information and a poster. At that point, of course, everything depended on the recipients' spreading the word and posting the posters, and I have no way of knowing how many of them did. Alas, we didn't get much response.

I paid the student out of my own pocket – and this raises the question of money. During the second year, a member generously offered to donate some artwork for a fundraiser. But what were we to do with the funds? This was, and remains, a sticking point. A bank account requires a taxpayer ID number for the organization; a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation requires extensive and ongoing paperwork (and someone to do it); other categories of small nonprofits don't really apply to us. Fiscal sponsorship was another possibility, but I could not find the right sponsor: the National Coalition of Independent Scholars was not encouraging, and the Peace Development Fund was not a good fit. (I should note that NCIS has had a change of leadership since then and might now be more open.) So we have remained unfunded.

In the meantime, we continued with programs and meetups and the blog. Here's a list:

Matt Emerson: Online Education and Distance Learning

Jones Library: "Speed Dating with the Independent Scholars": public program featuring five of us giving short presentations

Service Employees International Union (SEIU): informal meeting

Occasional meetups

Year Three: Maintaining

Activity was light. We had several meetups, and members shared interesting news about independent scholars for the blog. I was finishing a book and didn't have a co-chair or assistant. So this was a year of maintenance.

Year Four: Rebuilding

By mid-2015, it was time to rebuild. That summer, I attended part of a conference of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS). My blog post, reporting on it, generated quite a bit of discussion. Monthly meetups resumed later in the academic year.

Outreach also resumed. This time, I compiled a list of non-tenure-track faculty members from fourteen nearby colleges and universities, and I sent out a mailing to them. This more focused approach brought us several new people. I also issued another press release and some event listings. By spring, there was some new momentum.

And it was time for me to pass the leadership along to someone else. Welcome, Melissa. You've done a great job of identifying pressing issues and possible new directions.

I want to close with a few observations.

First, we've made a lot of contacts. I've mentioned the Ronin Institute, Five Colleges, Inc., NCIS, and SEIU. I've heard from members of the American Academy of Religion and of the American Historical Association for interested in academic alternatives. An independent historian inquired about interviewing other independent scholars. The editors of the journal *Zeteo*, seeking "generalist intellectuals," have also been in touch a couple of times. (Open inquiries are on the blog.) A network is building up. We are known.

Second, some things would be easier to do if we had money. As I mentioned, nonprofit financing is complicated and needs someone's sustained attention. Transparency would also be important.

Third, the nature of membership might need clarification. My experience has been that participants come with widely varying assumptions about such questions as whether there is a formal way to "join," whether there are criteria for membership (and if so, what they are), and how and when to invite newcomers. These questions have never caused major conflict, just mild

friction, but they may be worth revisiting. Similarly, it's been suggested that we affiliate with a large organization such as NCIS. Thus far, I haven't seen a strong response to the suggestion, but it may warrant reconsideration.

Working with independent scholars is a lot like the proverbial herding of cats. Academics tend to be independent-minded anyway, and independent academics are even more so. Besides, many of us are working hard just to keep our heads above water, never mind volunteering or participating in a group. Maybe the most important thing is that we have a place to tell our stories to one another. I've been amazed and moved by what people have shared with me: stories and struggles, courage and persistence, intelligence and imagination. Thank you, and good luck to all.

Patricia Appelbaum
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