In August 2001, I started at the department where I still work, at the University of Alabama. The following essay appears at the close to a collection of ten annual lectures that the department started to sponsor not long after my arrival, a lecture series funded by a generous endowment to the department for a position in Judaic Studies (called the Aaron Aronov Endowed Chair in Judaic Studies, it was established in 1990 and has been held by several scholars since that time, most recently by my colleague, Steve Jacobs). As described in the essay, the department at that time was “non-viable”—a judgment made by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE), based on an insufficient graduation rate among its majors—and, as its newly hired “outside” chair, my job was clear: revive the department or it risked losing its major and thereby becoming what we call “a service department,” offering only lower-level survey courses to “serve” the needs of other departments’ students (thereby offering only courses that meet the general requirements of what we call the core curriculum, such as its Humanities or its writing requirements). Inventing the annual Aronov lecture, to “present issues in the study of religion of broad relevance to the university community” (as our first flyers described it), was among the earliest things we did to begin our institutional resuscitation. But, as the essay makes evident, we did many more things than just this.

While I’ll leave to the essay itself a more detailed description of the department’s setting at that time and some of the specific things that we did to reinvent it—a reinvention that, I have no doubt, many departments also need—this introduction affords me the chance to talk a little more broadly concerning the way that I am continually amazed by how little attention professors, by and large, seem to give to the institutional conditions of their own labor. I recall a search committee to which I was once appointed that was looking for a chair of another department, and the mid-career and senior faculty members on it who said that they were too busy to devote time to drafting a strategic plan for the unit, seeing that instead as being the department chair’s job. I admit that at an earlier stage in my career, this would have probably flabbergasted me, but, given some of the experiences that I’ve had in higher education since I first began fulltime work in the university in 1993, this came as not much of a surprise. For on the one hand, we have many in higher education lamenting the loss of “shared governance” (whereby the faculty and the administration both participate in the decision-making that influences the future direction of the
institution) but, at the same time, it is extremely difficult to get anyone to, for example, serve on Faculty Senate at my own institution. Seeing that department, on whose search committee I served, as a microcosm of higher education meant to me that while we all wanted the benefits of a stable institutional home, few of us seem either interested in or capable of stepping up to take on the practical tasks that make that appearance of stability possible. To put it another way, stasis, in my experience, is not a naturally occurring state, much less is growth. (Instead, entropy is, or so the physicists tell us; or, as I sometimes say, “Good things are happening when bad things don’t.”) For I learned long ago that it takes considerable effort to make it look like everything is normal, average, or mundane—making “normal,” “average,” and “mundane” rhetorical tools that hide or downplay considerable effort going on behind the scenes. After all, we all realize the work that it takes every morning in order to look the same every day, no? When it comes to a university department, courses must be scheduled, semesters planned ahead, classroom doors must be unlocked, and dry erase markers and brushes stocked, airline tickets must be purchased for conference travel and reimbursements processed quickly, new faculty have to be brought onto the payroll and retirees have to come off, technology in classrooms must function properly and the photocopier has to be stocked with paper and filled with toner. And this is just the tip of a complex iceberg with many moving parts, one that—“Do you think that office needs to be painted this summer?”—if all are operating smoothly, make possible the conditions in which a professor can just walk into a classroom to teach or a student can just drop by the lounge between classes and check email on a smartphone plugged into the Wi-Fi network. Should it not be working, then one finds oneself standing at a jammed copier with a hundred exams to produce, with 30 minutes before it is supposed to begin.

All of this is to say that, in reply to those faculty who maintained that they were too busy to take a leadership role in brainstorming their own unit’s future (an exercise that might chart a course by providing a framework for future decisions, yes, but which will more than likely also simply serve as an exercise to challenge faculty to articulate their own sense of where the unit ought to go, debate it publicly among themselves, and thereby form bonds among themselves [if their differences of opinion are managed correctly] and indicate to others in their institution—such as deans and provosts—that they have an investment in their own department), I simply said (verbatim, as I recall): “The long-term good of the unit in which I earn my income is my first priority; and any time or effort that I invest there comes back to me ten-fold.” Simple as that. That few faculty seem to understand this point is what I find so puzzling, for in light of the exclusive emphasis so many of them place on the social capital