International Perspectives on the Academic Professions

The academic profession faces significant challenges from many fronts. Financial pressures have contributed to ever-increasing demands for accountability. Questions about the relevance of much academic research have been linked to demands that faculty teach more. The traditional high status of the professoriate has been challenged by unrelenting criticism in the media and elsewhere.

Philip Altbach, Monan Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, reports that in the United States and abroad, the academic profession continues to function without basic change or even much awareness of the external forces affecting universities today.
The Decline of the Traditional Professoriate

The traditional concept of the faculty is being supplanted by new hiring and promotion arrangements across the United States, and in other countries as well. The proportion of the professoriate in tenured and tenure-track positions is steadily declining. In the United States, approximately 35 percent of all faculty are part-timers, and over one-third of full-time faculty hold term appointments. While part-time faculty provide cost savings to institutions, they naturally do not feel much loyalty, nor do they contribute much to the institution beyond teaching courses assigned them. Full-time nontenure-track teachers tend to provide a more reliable teaching force, and yet they allow flexibility in staffing since the considerable turnover in such positions can be used to meet the demands of enrollment changes or institutional priorities.

In Germany and a number of other European countries, a full-time nontenure-track has long existed. In recent years, its use in the German university system has increased, with little apparent negative effect on the academic balance of the system. In Latin America, on the other hand, a majority of those teaching in universities are part-time, which has greatly influenced the ethos of higher education and hindered the emergence of a modern academic culture. Reformers there have argued that a full-time professoriate is a prerequisite for a competitive and effective academic system.

In the United States, it is likely that the numbers of full-time nontenure-track faculty will continue to expand significantly, while part-time staff may be cut back. The greatest changes probably will occur at less selective colleges and comprehensive universities, where the need to meet student demand in the context of diminishing resources will be most intense.

The implications of this emerging caste system, where the traditional faculty ranks constitute roughly half of the profession, are significant. Given that one of the strengths of the American system has been its relative lack of hierarchy—in sharp contrast to the Japanese system, for example—the structure of the American academic profession will be altered fundamentally by the new caste system. Further, it is the full-time tenure-track faculty who perform the complex governance functions of the institution: they serve on committees, design new curricula, and become department chairs. In short, they are the traditional core of the university. Finally, only full-time faculty have the time, support, and professional obligation to engage in research and publication. To the extent that teaching benefits from the engagement of faculty in active research, fewer researching faculty in the classroom eventually will adversely affect the quality of teaching.

Survey results referred to throughout this paper stem from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s international survey of the academic profession in 14 countries, including England, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia and Sweden in Europe; Hong Kong, Japan and Korea in Asia; Brazil, Chile and Mexico in Latin America; Israel in the Middle East; and Australia and the United States. The effort produced a massive data set based on the responses of 20,000 faculty members to a 200-plus item questionnaire.
The American academic profession is faced with daunting challenges. Yet faculty members do not appear to realize that if the traditional prerogatives of the professoriate are to remain intact, they will need to take an active role in ensuring institutional well-being.

Tenure

The American tenure system is under attack. However, despite perennial complaints that lazy professors are accountable to no one, in most institutions tenure probably will be retained with only modest modifications. Post-tenure review is one such reform, as pressures for institutional accountability are being extended to individual faculty members. It also is likely that as institutional concerns about financial and programmatic flexibility increase, the number of faculty awarded tenure will decrease.

Tenure was abolished recently in England, and in some countries it never has existed. Currently, 81 percent of American faculty surveyed believe that academic freedom—the preservation of which is the primary purpose of tenure—is strongly protected, but only 49 percent say there are no political or ideological restrictions on what a scholar may publish. Scholars in 10 of the 13 other countries surveyed felt more secure about what they can publish.

Scholarship Reconsidered and Assessed

Among the most important implications of the fiscal and institutional pressures facing higher education today is a significant reconfiguration of academic work. A sense that the research emphasis of the top tier of American universities may have gone too far has increasingly entered the higher education debate, and a movement to reemphasize teaching as the central responsibility of the academic profession has gained steam. When asked if their interests were in teaching or research, 63 percent of American academics responded that their commitments are primarily or leaning toward teaching. This compares with 44 percent in England, 33 percent in Sweden, and 28 percent in Japan.

Further, while financial and governmental pressures have been felt largely at the institutional level, assessment of effectiveness in the classroom is not far behind, particularly as more sophisticated methods of evaluation are developed. The widespread acceptance of norms of faculty performance, however, will require a cultural shift in the profession.

Morale

In general, the professoriate feels good about itself. There is little sense of crisis among academics, and most are unaware of the magnitude of problems facing American higher education. Not surprisingly, in all 14 countries, alienation from administration was a strong theme among the faculty. Faculty also are alienated from the governmental authorities who provide funding and shape broad approaches toward research, student aid, and affirmative action. Overall, there is a large gap between the satisfaction felt about local aspects of academe and the discontent with the broader policy direction of higher education.

Conclusion

The American academic profession is faced with daunting challenges. Yet faculty members do not appear to realize that if the traditional prerogatives of the professoriate are to remain intact, they will need to take an active role in ensuring institutional well-being.

Philip Altbach is the Monan Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. He has been a senior associate of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and serves as editor of the Review of Higher Education and of Educational Policy. Altbach has written widely on the academic profession and was coordinator of the international study of the academic profession sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation.
Fast Foreword ................................................................................................................................. 3
   Maureen Devlin

Privatizing University Services .................................................................................................. 11
   Sharon Oster

Do Private Colleges Make Big Profits? ....................................................................................... 14
   Gordon Winston

Higher Education Consortia: Seeking Solutions to Common Problems ................................. 17
   Will Reed

Continuous Learning: The Killer Application of Technology ................................................. 20
   Jack Wilson

MIT Learning Networks: Technological Education of the Future ............................................ 23
   Richard Larson

Cost Effective Uses of Technology in Teaching ........................................................................ 26
   Gil Whitaker

Electronics and the Decline of Books: The Transformation of the Classroom ....................... 29
   Eli Noam

Strolling in the Leadership Minefield of Higher Education ..................................................... 32
   Rodney Napier

International Perspectives on the Academic Professions ........................................................ 34
   Philip Altbach

Cover art by Leonardo da Vinci. “Study for a Flying Machine”
Paris, Institut de France.
Drawing
Reproduced with permission of Rosenthal Art Slides.

Forum Futures is made possible by a grant from the James Irvine Foundation