July 4, 2010

**Tenure, RIP: What the Vanishing Status Means for the Future of Education**

*By Robin Wilson*

Some time this fall, the U.S. Education Department will publish a report that documents the death of tenure.

Innocuously titled "Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2009," the report won’t say it’s about the demise of tenure. But that’s what it will show.

Over just three decades, the proportion of college instructors who are tenured or on the tenure track plummeted: from 57 percent in 1975 to 31 percent in 2007. The new report is expected to show that that proportion fell even further in 2009, dropping below one-third. If you add graduate teaching assistants to the mix, those with some kind of tenure status represent a mere quarter of all instructors.

The idea that tenure, a defining feature of U.S. higher education throughout the 20th century, has shrunk so drastically is shocking. But, says Stanley N. Katz, director of Princeton University's Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies, "we may be approaching a situation in which there will not be good, tenure-track jobs for the great majority of good people."

What does vanishing tenure mean for higher education? For starters, some observers say that college faculties are being filled with people who may be less willing to speak their minds: contingent instructors, usually working on short-term contracts.

Indeed, the American Association of University Professors says instructors need tenure to guarantee that they can say controversial things inside and outside the classroom without being fired.

But others argue that the disappearance of tenure is actually not the worst thing that could happen in academe. The competition to secure a tenure-track job and then earn tenure has become so fierce in some disciplines that academe may actually be turning away highly qualified people who don’t want the hassle. A system without tenure, but one that still gave professors reasonable pay and job security, might draw that talent back.

Ultimately, though, the future of tenure may hinge on a different
calculation: Does its absence hurt students enough in the classroom—something research has shown—that the cost savings to institutions are no longer worthwhile?

The prominent shift in the makeup of the professoriate didn't occur overnight. It happened gradually, without any public endorsement or stated plan, as the byproduct of other concerns—primarily budget shortfalls and administrators' interest in gaining flexibility. Now, in whole swaths of higher education, including at many community colleges and at for-profit institutions, tenure is a completely foreign concept. And it is waning at many regional state universities and at less-elite liberal-arts colleges, as well.

But faculty members at major research universities, where tenure is still prominent, often continue to think of it as a mainstay. "We operate as if tenure is the norm, but clearly it's not," says Adrianna Kezar, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Southern California. "Believing we still have this norm has prevented people from acting. Tenured faculty across the country never mobilized to say: Wait!"

The New Normal
Twenty or 30 years ago, when tenure was, in fact, the norm, scholars used to debate its merits and what a college or university might look like without it. They studied the pros and cons of tenure and the handful of institutions that had gone against the grain and eliminated the tenure track altogether. Evergreen State College, a liberal-arts college in Washington State, famously rejected tenure in favor of renewable contracts in 1971. And Florida Gulf Coast University was established without tenure in 1991.

Now that tenure is disappearing across higher education, you don't hear the same kind of debates. What people in higher education do talk about is whether the system that has grown over the last 20 years—heavy on adjunct professors who are paid as little as $1,500 per course—is what educators would have designed if the
destruction of tenure had been more purposeful. The universal answer to that question appears to be: No.

"To think the way some of the finest higher-education institutions in the nation educate students is with gypsy adjuncts who have to teach at two to three different places, that would not have been what you would have wanted," says Ronald G. Ehrenberg, a professor of industrial and labor relations at Cornell University. "You want faculty with a vested interest in the institution."

The AAUP has for years argued for the necessity of tenure. This spring Cary Nelson, president of the association, visited Principia College, a liberal-arts institution in Illinois where there is no tenure. "You could cut the fear with a knife," says Mr. Nelson. "Faculty members are guarded, they're not making courageous decisions about what to say, what to think, and how to challenge their students." (Jonathan Palmer, Principia's president, told The Chronicle that simply isn't true. "Tenure in and of itself does not induce or allay fears of faculty members," he said. "The deep, rich conversations we seek among our students and ourselves are not tied to tenure, but to the continuing desire to stretch, liberate, and educate.")

According to Mr. Nelson, though, the biggest loss isn’t what professors can’t say in the classroom. It’s what they don’t say to the president or the trustees—or to politicians. "The president doesn’t really care what you say in your World War II-history class," says Mr. Nelson. "You can say what you want to about your subject matter, but don’t think you can say what you want to about the president's edicts." Indeed, what’s disappearing along with tenure, say its advocates, is the ability of professors to play a strong role in running their universities and to object if they think officials are making bad decisions.

"One of the jobs of tenured faculty is to raise a lot of questions and make people uncomfortable," says Martin J. Finkelstein, a professor of higher education at Seton Hall University. "Nontenured faculty are very cautious. They want to be retained."

Vanishing tenure may be bad for students as well as teachers. A couple of dozen studies over the last decade have shown that as the proportion of professors off the tenure track rises, the proportion of students who return to college the following year and eventually graduate declines. Some researchers, like Ms. Kezar, say that may be because contingent instructors typically lack teaching resources, including offices, supplies, or professional-development opportunities.
Not everyone is mourning the decline of tenure, though. Cathy Trower, a senior research associate at Harvard University who has studied tenure for about a dozen years at the institution's Graduate School of Education, says tenure’s harsh up-or-out system—and the escalating demands for research and publication at the nation’s top universities—is actually driving away talented young people. "More and more men and women are saying, I don't want to be on that fast track," says Ms. Trower, who has studied 11,000 tenure-track professors at the nation's research universities. "Many are saying, This system is broken, I don't want it."

Only 70 percent of the tenure-track professors Ms. Trower studied at research institutions said they would choose to work at their universities if they had it to do over again. Another study, this one of Ph.D. students at the University of California that was published last year, showed that the proportion of men who said they were interested in faculty jobs at research institutions dropped from 45 percent when they first enrolled in graduate school to 39 percent later in their graduate-school careers. The proportion of women dropped from 36 percent to 27 percent.

Ms. Trower says it is possible to run a university with hard-working, committed scholars who are off the tenure track. "I'm outside the tenure system," she adds, "and I work really, really, hard."

How Low Will It Go?

As the proportion of professors within the tenured ranks dips lower and lower each year, the question becomes: Is there a rock bottom below which the tenured ranks will not go, or will tenure eventually disappear altogether?

Professors who talked to The Chronicle say it may go as low as 15 percent or 20 percent of all instructors, and then reach a holding pattern. "I think the financial pressures are so severe that other than the selective, wealthy liberal-arts colleges and the public and private flagship research universities, tenure is just going to be a vanishing species," says Mr. Ehrenberg.

He is among the scholars whose research shows the decline in tenure is a bad thing for students. Such studies could create public pressure to bring back tenure, says Marc Bousquet, an associate professor of English at Santa Clara University. "I think we're at a crossroads," says Mr. Bousquet. "Over the past 40 years, we've seen a growing trend to misrecognize tenure as a kind of merit badge for research-intensive faculty." Meanwhile, he says, "the majority of teaching-intensive faculty have been shunted out of the tenure system." In his view, all professors should be included on the tenure
track, and that's what a report on the issue by the AAUP will call for this fall.

But higher-education watchers don't hold out much hope that the numbers on tenure will turn around. "In the end, these are financial decisions, and they are very hard to reverse," says Frank J. Donoghue, an associate professor of English at Ohio State University who writes about the professoriate. "Once a university opens the door to staffing courses with adjuncts, they save so much money it's almost unthinkable for them to stop."
Wherever we come down on the continuation of tenure, we must agree that it needs more, constant thought, by the very nature of the good that does accrue to the institutions, their people, and our society from having (some/many) tenured faculty on the rolls.

1. Universities exist to generate new, innovative knowledge. That may seem a tired old cliche, but it is still true. There are few private businesses that exist to do that job, because there is rarely any profit in it (exceptions are in highly innovative technical areas with immediate payoffs; remember Bell Labs and the old IBM? Nowadays, Google and Microsoft.). It's primarily our job, and it is expensive, but the good that comes from it enhances and strengthens every part of our country, and gives more earning power and a better life even to people who never see the inside of a college building. Their survival depends on our survival, and tenure is a guarantee that we will survive the passions of the political moment:

2. This requires freedom of inquiry and freedom in communicating the results of that inquiry. Many, many of our students come into the classroom with their minds set against such things as "evil-lution," often because they don't understand the incredible advances in medicine, health, and the understanding of who we are, that comes with it. They need education, and that means resisting the know-nothing attitudes of their parents and our legislators (I'm in Texas) that would return education to concepts discredited generations before we came along. That means insulating faculty against these political pressures, so our research can move forward, and as it does, so also our teaching can (should!) move forward.

But there is no forward if we do not have faculty who can institute programs of research that they can reasonable hope they will have the time to see to completion. Tenure is a guarantee that we will have the time to complete those projects of theoretical and applied research that will return great benefit to ourselves, to our companions in our universities, and to society. The business model for higher education says, no results in this quarter (or semester, or academic year), out you go! You know the great good works that has been done by our universities because people had the time to see them through. Tenure gives them that time:
3. Which also means institutional continuity and innovation in research and teaching. A tenured faculty can give a university that real continuity over time that allows planning and development of programs that move us all forward, not sideways, into the future. Long-range planning of intellectual work can only be done by faculty with a long-range future at the institution; in other words, tenured faculty.

I'm violating my own preference against long posts, but the subject goes to the heart of who we are. We who are serious about this work have made a commitment to a life of learning, growth, and teaching discovery, need tenure to ensure we can do that life-long work, and to fend off the bottom-line, greed-is-good, Gresham's Law business/administration/political types who would destroy the best system of higher education the world has ever seen (where do our young people go to get a first-rate education? Tuva, or right here in the States?). Anyone who is sorry they made this choice, and would not do it again, should just leave, and right now (I notice none of those types have, according to the silence on the subject in the article). We need the space they're wasting for people committed to the good work we do.

Intelligent post-tenure review can "weed out the deadwood." For the rest of us, tenure allows freedom of inquiry and communication, continuity and innovation, and long range planning to prepare us for the changing world we are always moving into. And it allows us time to measure and contemplate the wonder of living and working in this world.

2. schwnj - July 04, 2010 at 12:30 pm

Many of the discussions and articles I've read in CHE about the decline in T/TT jobs talk about it in terms of the value of "Tenure" as a concept, and mostly how it relates to teaching. "Misrecognized" or not, at most medium to large institutions, T/TT is synonymous with "research faculty" and non TT are "teaching faculty." The decline in the proportion of TT jobs is about the economics of expensive research faculty teaching 2 or 3 courses per year, versus a lecturer who's paid $48K to teach a 5/5 load. When we actually reach the point of "the decline of tenure" is when we start to see balanced research/teaching/service assistant professor positions that aren't on the TT.
Also, as a researcher, tenure is quite important to me. It means that I can take chances researching the things I find most interesting. And, if things don't work out right away, I don't have to worry about not meeting some publishing quota.

3. roej107 - July 05, 2010 at 08:06 pm

"Over just three decades, the proportion of college instructors who are tenured or on the tenure track plummeted: from 57 percent in 1975 to 31 percent in 2007. The new report is expected to show that that proportion fell even further in 2009, dropping below one-third."

Just remind me, what is one-third as a percentage?

4. crne5907 - July 05, 2010 at 10:44 pm

The Chronicle is combining comments from two different interviews. While faculty members at Principia are vulnerable and anxious, because they have no job security, my impression from classes I visited is that the teaching is quite good. That said, contingent teachers are often careful not to offend stakeholders with power over them.

Cary Nelson

5. 22235933 - July 06, 2010 at 12:17 am

At our institution we were recently warned, indirectly, that as educators we are expected to teach only the "truth" about our subjects and refrain from discussing or injecting our personal opinions into them. This is despite the notion that we are experts in our field and might have drawn our own conclusions about the subject matter. Experts that are routinely paid HALF what we'd earn by working at McDonald's. The destruction of tenure means only one thing - the administrators that are hell bent on "putting butts in the chairs" at the highest tuition possible with the lowest overhead possible are going to win.
Adjuncts have no voice and now we are the majority of teachers in higher-education. At my institution, we outnumber full-time faculty 8 to 1 and yet, we have no voice. We can be replaced if we speak out against internal policy, say the wrong thing about a political candidate, or even assail the lack of our own voice. The ease at which we can be fired means that we will not speak out and education will suffer. There is legitimate harm in the tenure system but those injuries are substantially outweighed by the absurd and administrative-friendly adjunct system.

6. jwr12 - July 06, 2010 at 12:27 am

One argument for tenure that I rarely see made -- but that I happen to think is quite important -- is that it represents a way for universities to attract talented people into crowded fields while paying them nothing -- at least, nothing that makes a 7 year PhD seem like a rational graduate choice. Most TT jobs--despite being more than adjuncts get paid--are underpaid for the credentials involved. Throw into that the fact that a person has to scramble and sweat and move to a location that he or she may never have dreamed of, and the question naturally arises, why would a talented person with options bother?

Idealism about education, of course, is one answer, but idealism is a rickety foundation on which to build a long term relationship. You need something else in the mix. And long-term job security is an amortized chip a university can offer. I should also say that graduate degree careers all expect to cash in at some point. MBA's, MD's, Lawyers, school teachers etc. they all have a stage in their career where their economic security is established. While most faculty are indeed the sort of idealists who don't dream of "partner" money, they do respond to the ideal of an honest living.

For all these reasons, the erosion of the tenure track seems equivalent to me to the erosion of the pillar of the attractions of the academic career. Add to that what happens to wages when a position is adjunctified, and you're really making a PhD in most fields a profoundly irrational proposition. With all respect to Harvard, this idea that the TT is so scary it scares off talented folk -- who prefer the tamer waters of investment banking? -- strikes me as ludicrous.

IF Universities could offer about a 30% increase on starting wages, alongside decent term contracts, then MAYBE one could eliminate the TT entirely without damaging the flow of talent
to the academy. Otherwise, it's just not serious, as far as knowledge and institution building goes. Who will become a historian of medieval Europe, and move across country to some small town, to teach for an entry-level clerk's wage, only to be turned out the door at the next trustees meeting? Or for failing to laugh at a president's jokes at an alumni reception?

And I wonder, as well, if critics properly calculate all the side work done by faculties -- the late night committee work, the innumerable side tasks -- and the costs of constant turnover as well. The bottom line also might not make a great deal of sense, as well.

7. rickw - July 06, 2010 at 06:40 am

There seems to be an assumption that "administrative flexibility" is somehow a good idea when it comes to new program implementation and revision of the curriculum. One may make the counter argument, however, that American universities and colleges are slipping in international standing because--among other things--of the rise of a new class of arrogant administrators who now dominate decision making in our institutions of higher learning.

The new administrative class has, magically, sold boards and legislatures on the concept that faculty are a commodoty, and as such should have little voice, or better yet, no voice in decision making concerning the curriculum or in meeting student needs. Often times this administrative class comes from the business sector and seeks to do to our universities and colleges what they have done to the economy.

At the university where I teach we have one senior administrator who has held a teaching appointment. Shared governance is in a shambles and the cut and gut mainia rules supreme. Sound familiar? Welcome to the new American university.

8. mainiac - July 06, 2010 at 06:55 am

BINGO rickw!
The business model has consumed (hawhaw) colleges and univs, at the expense of those who create the "commodity." Ask BP what firing the highest paid and talented engineers to cut costs has done for them.

9. 11242283 - July 06, 2010 at 07:20 am

There seem to be so many contradictions in this article and responses to it that I don't know where/how to begin in responding to it. I'm with #7 to a large extent: a culture of "administrative flexibility" and the reduction of faculty to commodities does not augur well for any discussion of dismantling tenure in a way that is at all advantageous to faculty as professionals who then somehow retain either professional level salaries or the freedom of inquiry so essential to universities. But that being said, I see little evidence at my own university that my colleagues want tenure in order (as Cary Nelson intimates) to assist in the running of the university. The overhyping of "research" as the end all and be all of faculty lives (to the detriment of either teaching or service) means that most of my "research" colleagues want tenure in order to be left alone to do whatever it is they do and that these particular colleagues have little or no sense of institutional commitment. And indeed, why should they? The whole reward system is structured to advantage those who pursue their research to the exclusion of other things and who don't worry their pretty little heads about mundane things like governance. They may rail at the general stupidity of many administrators (who thwart their personal research or career goals) but generally they aren't interested and as long as administrative flexibility advantages them, they'll stay uninterested (and are happy to do so). In fact, I imagine that in a tenure free system, these (relatively few) faculty would still probably prosper since their research independence is a myth anyway shaped as it is by the national funding priorities of grant-making agencies, foundations and the like.

While research is absolutely crucial to the functioning of faculty and their ability to transfer knowledge to and inspire others and to the liveliness of universities, in general, it has been vastly oversold as the mark of success for faculty members. As I am nearing retirement, I have seen many a tenure and promotion file in my day and have been amused over the last 20 years by how faculty with interesting yet relatively modest research profiles (which in fact is most faculty) write about this aspect of their lives as if they were soon-to-be recognized MacArthur Genius Grant recipients (it's not only our students who have outsized notions of their self-worth). And while I find this somewhat amusing, it's also quite sad -- that so many of my colleagues don't appreciate or value the other aspects of faculty lives and have bought into the notion that they are independent contractors who need to be left alone (thank you, tenure) to produce modest, interesting but not particularly earth shattering research.
Many of the dwindling number of faculty (especially at research institutions) find this system acceptable since it feeds into an academic celebrity culture which hold out the the promise of a ticket out of mundane things like teaching and governance ---- and, by the way, which is promoted by the Chronicle whose obsession with the movements and deals of a very small number of faculty in "People"-magazine like columns and naming 'stars' of the future is a symptom of this problem.

I don't know what the answer is to any of this, but while I hold adminstrators and academic leaders in large part responsible for where we are, I also think faculty should look in the mirror at we've done to the tenure system as well.

10. osholes - July 06, 2010 at 07:21 am

I agree with rickw and maniac, and will go one small step further. Boards bring a corporate model with them, including a short-term view of the future and little patience. They have been convinced by the administration that faculty cannot be trusted (all the more reason for the protection of tenure).

Now the alumni are joining the fray, at least the alumni that share the dislike of faculty with some trustees. So we see the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, whose goal is to put faculty in their place. Actually, it's to get even with all the perceived slights they've gotten from faculty who don't toe the line or give out high grades. Just track down the quotes from these people that are sprinkled through the Chronicle and you'll get the flavor of their dislike and disdain for faculty.

85% of the TT faculty at my college get tenure, and teaching is weighted most heavily (though the administration and board want more research to "enhance our reputation" - a story for another posting). The system generally works well, and with the administration and board we have now, we need the protection afforded by tenure.

Clearly, each institution is different, so let each institution decide it's own policy.
When tenure was established, it was for teaching and related scholarly activity. My long-retired father-in-law was a full tenured professor of mathematics at a distinguished university with only a few publications. For most faculty today, it is synonymous with funded research and publications (and refusal to teach because it takes time away from research). In medical schools/healthcare, we have seen the toll that money and for-profit health care have on the system. Tenure died when it became for money rather than teaching/scholarly skills. For-profit education rips the heart out of what is left.

An interesting analysis, but I would like to see the actual numbers not just the percentages. By what amount has the overall higher education enterprise increased since 1975? Is the increasing percentage of non-tenured positions due in part to the increase in for-profit institutions? Has the actual number of tenured positions decreased? I presume the actual report will include the numbers but it would be helpful to include these in the summary.

Bmartin makes a notable point. The trend is not driven on the merits of tenure. The entire higher education model is terraforming rapidly. Want a glimpse of the future of tenure and higher education? Ask a senior editor at a metropolitan daily newspaper about job security. Mainstream media faced the changes first. Universities are next.

Economics, technology, generational changes, governments, and globalization are just of few of the waves slamming into the academic world as you've known it. The already crumbling support structures of the 20th Century Academy will be hardly recognizable in another decade.

Still young and believe in old-style tenure? Good luck with that. What passes for tenure in the not-too-distant future won't resemble what it does today.
Since when is 70% of a population a figure warranting the characterization, "only"? ("Only 70 percent of the tenure-track professors Ms. Trower studied at research institutions said they would choose to work at their universities if they had it to do over again.") Only 70% feel that things are terrible, so let's leave things alone -- see, it doesn't make any sense. 30% of the people express varying degrees of displeasure with the status-quo, so let's destroy everything and do what some portion of this 30% feel would be better -- see that's even worse!

The proportions mentioned in the article underrepresent the proportion of tenured or tenure track faculty teaching classes, since at research I universities where there is a higher percentage of T/TT faculty, they have a very light teaching load.

As the article points out, we have come to this point by default, not by design. So what are the alternatives? A return to a majority tenured faculty is probably not a realistic expectation. Also pointed out in the article is the model of renewable contracts. No mention was made of the length of these contracts. I worked in the North Carolina Community College system which has one year renewable contracts. The only time that faculty seemed to fear for their jobs is when enrollment in their area fell to the point that their program was in danger. That did not seem unreasonable. In Georgia, the newest state university uses 3-5 year renewable contracts. Again, this does not seem unreasonable to me. I worked for a couple of decades in private industry where we had no contracts and any day could be your last. There and in the CC system, I counselled students and workers that they had to continually be preparing for their next job, and it might not be where you are. This lifelong learning model does not seem to me to be at odds with the life of a professor. If you have been keeping current, and are good at what you do, you find another job.

Finally, a third model might be dual tracks for research and teaching. This is used in some disciplines at some institutions. If we really want our research faculty to focus on research, let them to that, and teach grad students. They should also run an annual seminar to update their teaching colleagues on changes in the field. Let teaching faculty focus on teaching, and enjoy
pay and status that reflects the importance of what they do. It might not be equal to research faculty, but they should not be second class citizens in their place of work.

I am not tenured, my wife is. I don't buy the notion that you cannot speak your mind unless you have tenure. It helps if you try to do it in a constructive manner. But what about the courage of your convictions. That is all most Americans have to protect them. It does not take courage to speak up when you have nothing to lose. In fact, it may encourage frivolous complaining and long faculty meetings spent on unimportant issues - does that sound familiar??

16. evbiii - July 06, 2010 at 08:48 am

Am I the only one that thinks the feminization of the academy has led to the demise of tenure. It's funny how any prominent position loses prestige as soon as women become the fastest growing participants.

17. lgreco - July 06, 2010 at 09:11 am

The article states "A system without tenure, but one that still gave professors reasonable pay and job security, might draw that talent back."

As a dean at a non-profit university that offers no tenure but (very) reasonable pay, I have advocated an employment contract with a 3-5 year termination notice, convertible to a buyout option.

What other ways are there to provide some sense of job security that will contribute to an increased sense of academic freedom, in the absence of tenure?

18. physicsprof - July 06, 2010 at 09:16 am
Why nobody talks about the obvious reason for corporatization of HiEd and demise of tenure as a part of it -- changed attitude of the American public. You get what you pay for. If you abandoned your public institutions of education to their own survival (and many institutions' budgets have only 1/5 coming from state appropriations), if you force them to earn money they need, they will have no choice but to adopt a business model. Corporatization of HiEd is not the cause, it is the consequence. Reliance on cheap labor as well as bloated ranks of executives whose primary role is procurement and management of funds is not so much the malice of administrators as the sad situation they (and HiEd) are placed into by the taxpayers.

19. jthelin - July 06, 2010 at 09:34 am

I find it peculiar and hypocritical that many high level administrators (e.g., presidents, vice presidents, provosts, deans) insist on having a tenured faculty position as part of their own administrative package. Best of all are the eventual press conferences when a president or provost or dean announces, "I want to return to my teaching, students and research . . ." -- even though their prior commitment to them is either dubious or long gone.

I would like to hear reports from colleagues nation-wide -- at your own institution, how many former administrators have "returned to the faculty" with tenure -- and very high pay?

20. 22205373 - July 06, 2010 at 09:40 am

This hysteria has to stop. The headline, the use of percentages rather than absolute numbers... I venture to say that the total number of tenured professors is higher than it has ever been. The cause of more untenured instructors, and thus the ratio of untenured-to-tenured, is the explosion in college enrollment. Tenure is not dead. Of course it may become that way if we act like it's a fait accompli.

21. generally_academic - July 06, 2010 at 09:46 am

Just a quick note on salaries now and then. I compared what I made 35 years ago with what that salary is worth in today's dollars [using the BLS's Inflation Calculator].
Now, I came to work at the worst-paying senior college in Texas, which was, and is, one of the poorest paying states in the Union. My starting salary as a TT Asst. was, in today's dollars, $46,500.00/9 months. Back then, that was a bottom-of-the-barrel salary in senior college higher education. Check the Chron's published survey of faculty salaries today, and see how we're really doing.

22. goodeyes - July 06, 2010 at 09:51 am

There has been a major growth in for-profit universities which might explain a great deal of the decline of those with tenure. There also has been a large growth in community college enrollment in which tenure is less common.

23. usclibrary - July 06, 2010 at 10:10 am

I agree wholeheartedly with commenter # 6. He/ she should write the next article for CHE.

24. mlisaacs - July 06, 2010 at 10:16 am

Just a few points:

1) The remaining tenured and tenure track professors are now managers. They manage the adjunct faculty. They assume more and more service and administrative roles because there are fewer of them to share the responsibilities. This results in less time for research and interactions with students.

2. There will come a time (very soon) where young people will have no interest in pursuing a Phd. It is already true in languages and the humanities. Assuming huge debts for advanced degrees when there is no future will contribute to a loss of talent for higher education.

3. Grade inflation has come about as the non tenured and adjuncts are faced with student
evaluations that may cost them their jobs.

4. In our very litigious society, many people have received tenure who did not really deserve it. The institution must prove incompetence and cannot demand excellence.

5. Tenure has been abused by some professors who simply stop growing and settle back to fix up their houses on their sabbatic leaves.

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Possible solutions: 1) Full time contracts with term limits. I have long thought that the 7 year term is a good one. Every 7 years, faculty should be evaluated. If they do not carry their weight in all aspects of collegiate responsibilities, they should be given a terminal year's pay and dismissed. This would keep everyone on their toes throughout their careers.

2) Stop building palatial campuses. European universities do not build "cities" with country club like housing and student unions. It is the concept of "competition" that has driven this. Doing well in the magazine ratings and "looking good" in the brochure and on line pictures has taken precedence over high quality teaching and standards.

3) Re-examine collegiate sports. The cost of maintaining this huge industry, which really provides the "farm" system for football and basketball has no place in the training of scientists, mathematicians, linguists, poets, historians, teachers, artists, and musicians. Again, European, Indian, and Asian universities do not do this. They are going to provide the world with the dominant educated populations if this country does not change. It will, if it has not already, become a national security issue.

25. jwr12 - July 06, 2010 at 10:33 am
I'll add another couple of thoughts. First, I agree with those calling for more numbers. Tracking the crisis according to global percentages hides a number of important issues. One is absolute size of the faculty (as has been pointed out). Another is variation by discipline and institution. Another is reason for the adjunct position. I work at a big, land-grand institution, in a humanities department (for instance). While we employ teaching assistants to lead sections (and thus conduct a lot of class time), we have very few adjunct positions. The vast majority of students are taught either by FTE / TT faculty, or by them in combination with graduate students. We do have adjuncts, defined as short term instructors teaching entire classes. But virtually all (I can't think of an exception) are either 1) recent PhD's for whom we have created positions, because we cannot fund them otherwise and they do not have jobs or 2) spouses of university employees for whom positions were created as part of either recruitment or retention.

Now, I certainly don't think these positions are plums. I wish our PhD's had TT jobs and that the permanent adjuncts hired as part of retention / recruitment cases had full positions, in keeping with their very high credentials. (The luck of the draw here is often cruel, with one PhD spouse getting a job the other one is equally deserving of). But I note that (so far) administrative cost-cutting pressure has not converted this department into the type of pyramid the article describes. And I wonder how that works across fields. By contrast, our English department (as I understand) is much more like the anti-utopia described in the article.

26. trendisnotdestiny - July 06, 2010 at 10:36 am

Generally, I despise reductionary thinking. But here, the underlying complexity that is being discussed is about risk.

If we do not want to play by them, then we have to act collectively period... otherwise we accept that many of the comments/responses of this article are merely self-reported versions of perceived risk-shifting consequences.
However, we have to acknowledge that once a market is opened, it is damn hard to change the economic forces brought about by the revenue created from it.... (i.e privatized higher ed)