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# The Twenty-First-Century Professoriate

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WE NEED A NEW VISION IF WE WANT TO  
CREATE A POSITIVE FUTURE FOR THE FACULTY.

**N**ot long ago, most academic insiders felt confident in saying, “the faculty *are* the university.” The faculty may still be the university, but who are the faculty?

From public community colleges to private research universities, America has created the most powerful machine for the development of human capital in the history of the world. Yet an unintended change in our academic workforce puts at risk the supply chain of America’s talent, the very creativity and innovation that has set us apart.

### The Faculty

With little fanfare and even less institutional self-reflection, the entire system of American postsecondary education is undergoing a profound transformation. In their 2006 book *The*

*American Faculty*, education and public policy scholars Martin Finkelstein and Jack Schuster document that “higher education is being destabilized in the face of extraordinarily rapid change.” One aspect of this transformation involves the nature of the academic workforce. The composition, duties, and classifications of the professoriate are being reshaped by economic realities driven by diminished public support and concurrent increased demand for access, a transformation well documented by higher education researchers Judith Gappa, Ann Austin, and Andrea Trice in their 2007 book *Rethinking Faculty Work*.

Here are some of the degrees of difference that faculty may be feeling but not yet seeing, as set forth by Schuster, Gappa, and their colleagues—and updated with information from periodic

reports on employees in higher education issued by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

- Within the next decade, 40 to 60 percent of the current faculty will reach retirement age.
- Tenure-ineligible full-time appointments account for 30 percent of the academic workforce.
- More than half of new full-time appointments are in tenure-ineligible positions.
- Part-time appointments account for more than 40 percent of the academic workforce (and 65 percent of recent appointments).
- About 80 percent of part-time faculty and 67 percent of full-time non-tenure-track faculty do not hold doctorates.

In 2002, Clark Kerr (who created the Carnegie classifications) predicted that "it may be increasingly difficult and misleading to talk about the future of 'higher education.' There will be many quite different segments, each with its own future. Institutions in the different segments will not know or care much about each other." While he does not raise the question, we must wonder whether there is a profession that can span this segmentation and, therefore, whether the current model of doctoral education is sufficient for all of the emerging segments. This question is not yet pressing, but it will be.

In October 2006, Stanley Katz, former president of the American Council of Learned Societies and current lecturer at Princeton University's

prophetically said, "Whatever unity is found is due to the pressure of like needs, the influence of institutional imitation and rivalry, and to informal exchange of experience and ideas. These methods have accomplished great things, but have we not come to a time when more can be achieved by taking thought together?"

Our unwillingness "to inquire into our own situation," as Dewey said, and our unwillingness to engage the responsibilities of our work as a profession are contributing as much to the unraveling as the economic factors that have led to a contingent and segmented workforce.

Put simply, there is a growing divide between this reality and the ideal of what education leader Gene Rice has called the "complete scholar," which still sets the model for most PhD programs and, ironically, continues to influence unrealistic expectations for most new appointments—whether contingent, differentiated by function, or both. Schuster and Finkelstein predict "that before the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some of these institutions will gradually move to a predominantly full-time contingent faculty and that others will maintain a bare majority of core full-time faculty" who have responsibility for teaching *and* for research *and* for professional service *and* for academic citizenship.

In the absence of a new and coherent comprehensive model of faculty work across the full range of evolving appointments, this change in the workforce must be seen as a loss—if not one of the few modern instances of the demobilization of a profession. What is becoming increasingly clear is this: most American colleges and universities can no longer sustain an academic workforce based on an ideal of the "complete scholar" engaged in coherent, integrated, and self-directed work

## THERE IS A GROWING DIVIDE BETWEEN THIS REALITY AND THE IDEAL OF THE "COMPLETE SCHOLAR," WHICH STILL SETS THE MODEL FOR MOST PHD PROGRAMS.

The professoriate, which has evolved rapidly and dramatically over the past fifty years, is coming undone. Demographic analyses point to one unraveling. The erosion of our work as a *profession* is another.

### Unbundling Faculty Roles

The actual work ordinarily considered to be "faculty work" is increasingly done by specialists in, respectively, teaching, research, professional service, or administration. The holistic, integrated career of the "professor" is being relegated to a decreasing minority in most institutions and remains intact at only a relative few elite colleges and universities. Without some countervailing force—perhaps in the form of a restated vision of the professoriate—the very concept of faculty work as the work of a profession may be lost.

Woodrow Wilson School, asked in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "What Has Happened to the Professoriate?" He concludes that multiple professoriates arose out of the response to national needs in the 1940s and 1950s for increased access and research and from the realization of the importance of education to democratic processes. But Katz, like so many others of his generation, senses a loss amidst this great accomplishment as professors have turned away from their local institutions and from teaching to focus instead on research and on disciplines that span national and international boundaries.

He recalls John Dewey's 1915 address to the first meeting of the AAUP, in another period of transformation of higher education, when there was no common ground to address the challenges of the time. Dewey

across the full range of teaching, research, service, and governance. The predictable career path leading from graduate student to tenured full professor is no longer the norm.

The change is truly important as America—in the face of global competition—turns its attention to student learning and to accountability for performance. The shift away from faculty to students and learning outcomes is profound. If students can demonstrably learn as well from contingent faculty as from complete scholars, who will complain? What difference can it make if faculty work is segmented and faculty appointments are contingent? Only a few elite colleges and universities will be able to sustain the familiar faculty ideal, while most of the rest will be forced into new and uncertain models whose true nature has not yet taken shape (despite the pathos conjured by “Road Scholars” and other names for these new models).

**A New Vision**

For some, but perhaps only a few, there is urgency in our collective need to address the future of the professoriate as a profession, one that is larger than disciplinary specializations or personal advancement and one that is integrated across the functions of faculty work. In a college or university where the majority of those teaching, advising, serving the community, administering, researching, or seeing patients and clients may be contingent, part time, and without the loyalty that tenure is presumed to confer, who has responsibility for the collective work of the institution—for its coherent mission, its service to the larger society, and its role in preparing globally and civically competent graduates?

The academic workforce has already changed, and we now need a

pragmatic model of “the faculty”— whoever they are—that can preserve what is best about the American academy in a period of global as well as national change. If contingent appointments and disaggregated work are irreversible realities, what new model of the professoriate might reasonably retain essential elements common to other professions? Among these common elements are intellectual knowledge about what it means to be a member of the profession (including, but certainly not limited to, disciplinary expertise); skills that enable success carrying out professional duties (in the case of faculty, in teaching and professional service as well as research); self-awareness of the values and attitudes we most associate

to replace the hollowed-out core of the old ideal—one that stands proudly, if shakily, as the placeholder for what is yet to be reformed and renamed.

**Teaching**

In the absence of other authorities, regional accrediting agencies (almost invisibly) have assumed the role of providing assurances of institutional quality—a role filled by the faculty when the faculty were the university. While these accreditors focus almost exclusively on one dimension of faculty work—teaching—and to a lesser degree on academic citizenship, they have accepted the economic realities of a contingent academic workforce. They focus on results instead of who is teaching.

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with the life and practices of the profession; and work conditions befitting a professional.

Clearly, the future work of institutions (as opposed to the work of individual faculty members) will require many different types of academic appointees performing increasingly differentiated and specialized functions. Resource constraints, calls for nimbleness and flexibility, and rapidly changing demands for expertise all require a workforce that is more pliable than any one of its individual members. Only a few institutions will be rich enough to meet new demands by adding full-time tenured faculty instead of “repurposing” existing staff or replacing large portions of it with lower-cost or specialized academic “workers.” The displacement of the profession is well under way, and no new model exists

When faculty and their credentials are a means and not an end, the concept of “the faculty” loses some of its coherence and uniformity. When a transfer student educated by part-time community college faculty members who hold master’s degrees performs as well as (or better than) “native” junior classmates at a university, do our stereotypes of the faculty matter any longer? Accreditors need evidence beyond credentials, and institutions may be able to achieve their educational mission with a different kind of academic workforce. Once this transition is substantiated through accreditation, there is likely to be no return.

Colleges and universities have themselves adapted to this unbundled reality with little self-reflection, and trustees and institutional leaders do not expect institutional loyalty from faculty as long as the business

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of the institution is carried out successfully. When presidents, provosts, and many deans are in office only five to seven years, accountability is flexible and, in return, faculty do not have to be personally responsible for institutional performance or even engaged with the institution as a whole. One casualty has been the degree itself as the cumulative sum of work completed. The purposeful breadth of learning, its coherence, and its meaning have receded in the face of course-level performance, portable credits, and the preeminence of the major.

#### Governance

Success in one's own discipline is enough. And participation in faculty governance is widely considered

If current hiring patterns prevail during this period of rapid retirement, we may find ourselves not only repeating Dewey's lament of the last century—wondering if there is any underlying unity to the professoriate—but also asking if there is a profession worth saving. When as many as two-thirds (or more) of the people actually contributing to a college's academic mission—and especially to student learning—do not participate in governance, can the system sustain itself? Can those faculty members who do not have a stake in the educational objectives of their institutions be expected to work as energetically as their colleagues and with equal commitment to goals they cannot shape or even affect? More to the

accountability within an ethic of public service at the levels of both personal attainment and institutional performance. While not all faculty conduct research or provide professional services to their communities, all faculty teach or at least indirectly support teaching—the one core function that is common to colleges and universities of all classifications.

#### The Call to Action

If we were to concentrate on the core responsibilities of teaching and learning and of shared governance, could we affect the future in intentional and positive ways that might lead to a more satisfied and effective faculty and yet help colleges and universities succeed?

The faculty most familiar with the complex set of issues described here—those nearing the end of their professional careers—need to provide leadership by opening new prospects for the next generation. Many current faculty do not want change because they believe strongly in the lives they have led and in the model they have embraced. Others, however—including many senior scholars who understand the importance of their legacy as well as early-career faculty—may be willing to consider a new model of faculty work that reflects the reality of institutional practice.

Most of those who would restart the history of our profession realize that any alternate future is likely to depend on changes in the profession itself—and thus across all types of institutions. There will always be tempting pockets of localized reform as havens of satisfaction, but they will remain isolated pockets until something more systemic is imagined and enacted. While it is fitting that the succeeding generation provide the imagination, only the receding generation can create the opportunity.

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to be optional. Yet governance—shared responsibility for the success of the institution—may be the defining characteristic of the professoriate as a profession and the major differentiating factor between contingent and tenured faculty. It is through shared governance that the values and attitudes of our work take form and have consequence in the context of practice in a particular locale. It is through the collective action of the faculty that the results of faculty work—teaching, research, and service—acquire weight and meaning, since faculty still control hiring, promotion, tenure, and approval of policies that determine the role of contingent faculty. When the values and practices of our profession are negotiable, however, governance is inconsequential.

point, can the underlying professionalism of the remaining "real" faculty in elite colleges long endure when the "pressure of like need" or the "influence of institutional imitation" has so dissipated that only a small number of places exist to practice a profession as a community of scholars?

As we contemplate the real academic workforce in its entirety, we are likely to encounter too many variations in the approaches to teaching, research, and civic engagement to permit a common core of intentional reform. But with regard to teaching, there are enough unifying goals related to student learning to make it tantalizing to think about the professoriate in its whole complexity, to imagine ways to improve professional preparation, professional conduct, and professional

What would such a plan for change look like, and who should be involved? The AAUP, certainly, but also other organizations that can play unique roles, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities or the American Association of Community Colleges. Surely considerable discussion and debate is needed, but the effort would include elements of intentional change of the sort Dewey hoped to inspire a century ago.

The plan would feature a two-pronged awareness campaign: the first within higher education, to create both a sense of urgency and a sense of responsibility for intentional change, and the second across a broad range of public interests, to identify what is at risk. It would also need to include a coordinated effort to name, define, and assert the underlying values, the core knowledge, and the common practices that distinguish our work as a profession—one that is grounded in teaching but integrated with research, service, and the professional duty of shared governance—without regard to contingent, tenured, or part-time status. A profession is determined by principles, not the people who imperfectly implement them.

Another element in such an undertaking would be the articulation of a vision of the profession based on economic, social, and global realities. Continued reform of doctoral programs, with a renewed commitment to shared professional purpose by “taking thought together” in preparing graduates for the real academic lives most of them will lead, would also be important. We would need to reaffirm the public purpose of higher education and its foundation in the liberal arts as the collective responsibility of all faculty across all disciplines and degrees by reclaiming the degree itself—not merely the major—as the first



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**WE NEED TO CREATE A NATIONAL COMMISSION TO REFORM THE PROFESSION OF COLLEGE-LEVEL TEACHING AND INCLUDE WITHIN IT A VISION THAT INCLUDES ALL OF ITS PRACTITIONERS.**

purpose of faculty work and by centering it on graduating globally competent citizens. And we would need to recognize the distinct role that all national associations—including disciplinary societies—can play in imagining a new twenty-first-century professoriate and hold their officers and leaders accountable for engaging both new faculty and contingent faculty. Finally, we need to create a national commission, with goals and purpose and support no less meaningful than the Flexner Commission of 1905 (which led to the overall transformation of medical education in the United States), to reform the profession of college-level teaching, and to include within it a vision that includes all of its practitioners.

The ability to address these issues must be greater than the capacity or

even the self-interest of single institutions or associations. An effective reformulation of the new professoriate must consider both individual and institutional needs and objectives. Moreover, the prospect of intentional change must overcome the natural tendency of academic leaders at the level of president or provost to view institutional development in time frames that coincide with their likely tenure in office. Associations, therefore, become critical in sustaining reform even as real change depends on the actions of individual institutions.

**Restarting History**

Most faculty have little institutionally generated incentive to think beyond their own careers or their own (current) departments or to consider themselves as professionals in a practice larger than their

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specializations. The fact that many faculty do take the broader perspective, and the success of programs such as the now-defunct Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards or the Carnegie Foundation's initiatives on the professoriate, offer encouraging evidence that a basis exists for a new, more inclusive vision.

Trustees fear the unsettling and disruptive reaction of faculty to board-imposed changes and are prone to respond to presidents who have more manageable agendas for change (and time frames matched to their probable tenure). With notable exceptions, political leaders find little capital in higher education as either advocates or critics. Reporters, commentators, and columnists from media of all kinds

And the rest of the world is not sleeping. Many nations are investing in new concepts of higher education with the clear intention of creating a competitive edge for the twenty-first century. They are not limited by the twentieth-century American faculty model even as they are stimulated by its success. An educational "Sputnik" has been launched while America nods. It's time for an influential new national policy adviser like Vannevar Bush, if not an Abraham Flexner, to step forward.

If there is to be an initiative on the professoriate, it is likely to arise outside the usual framework for projects and require some capacity for connecting individual faculty, institutions (perhaps through their associations), disciplinary societies,

performance—mission—of one's own local institution (even if it is but the current stop along a career) as the elemental core of the profession. In short, we need a new vision of the professoriate that will prove durable and sustainable despite the market forces that are currently restructuring both our institutions and the professoriate.

Many related and important issues could be addressed within this context: understanding the reciprocal implications of embracing part-time and untenured teachers as members of the profession; defining in specific terms the duties of the profession; linking teaching with research, professional service, and civic engagement as a coherent set of activities; affirming the importance of academic freedom with a pragmatic and principled definition; articulating the reciprocal responsibilities of tenure; accepting responsibility for working conditions and shared governance; and redirecting doctoral education to prepare graduates for a profession as well as a disciplinary specialty or a job.

But first, we must determine how to frame an argument about the future of the professoriate in a positive way that could serve as a rallying point for further discussion and action. And then we must articulate a vision of the future professoriate that is attractive yet practical enough to entice the next generation of scholars while enabling colleges and universities to fulfill their public purpose. As Dewey said, "the true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems." Our problems are clear, and it is now time to talk about the future of our history. ☞

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are often good at lobbing hand grenades into America's living room, but they seldom pose solutions to educational discontinuities and problems or even stick with an issue long enough to help define what the issue's underlying causes may be.

Who else will speak with convincing urgency about the risk that America is taking by not attending to its faculty as a profession and as a profoundly important national asset? If the professoriate is, in fact, rapidly fragmenting itself, on the one hand, into a small number of elite colleges and universities with faculties of complete scholars and, on the other hand, everyone else, then we must ask about the implications of such a societal divide. In a time of increasing access, the elites by themselves cannot sustain America's leadership.

accrediting agencies, unions, and certainly the AAUP—the very organization that first dared us to think of ourselves as a profession. Perhaps the first step would be for the AAUP to convene all of the responsible parties to ask if the time has come, once again, to face squarely the changed reality of our work and our workplace. As the concrete follow-up, a commission of unquestioned integrity and prestige might turn discussion into action.

The central purpose of such a commission has to be to inquire into the nature of "professing" as a profession and into the complexities of what it means to be "the professoriate." And above all else, it needs to play a role in reasserting the centrality of teaching and a responsibility for the collective