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Managing the Academic Racehorse: Bioaccountability, Surveillance, and the Crafting of Docile Faculty in Mexican Universities

Blanca Minerva Torres-Olave and María Elena Torres-Olave

Abstract

In this essay, we consider the “petty” managerial technologies of audit and surveillance that shape the lives of Mexican faculty and introduce the term *bioaccountability* to refer to the growing use of biometric control mechanisms implemented around the world to monitor faculty activities and performance. We draw on personal experience at three Mexican public universities to illustrate the chilling impact of encroaching (bio)accountability policies on academic culture, including the gradual erosion of academic freedom.

On May 6, 2014, the faculty union at the Universidad Nacional de Trujillo in Peru called for a seventy-two-hour general strike to protest against the introduction of biometric controls to monitor faculty presence on campus during work hours.¹ The strike was the latest in a series of conflicts between the faculty and university administration dating back to 2011, when law students donated a fingerprint scanner to the School of Law and demanded that it be used as a deterrent to faculty absenteeism. In June 2011, an official resolution was adopted to introduce biometric controls for faculty across all UNT schools and colleges.² In the ensuing

¹ Lucyana Zavaleta Urtecho, “Docentes de la UNT: Control biométrico es cortina de humo.” *La República*, May 7, 2014, <http://larepublica.pe/archivo/790887-docentes-de-la-unt-control-biometrico-es-cortina-de-humo>.

² “Universidad Nacional de Trujillo (UNT) controlará asistencia de catedráticos usando relojes biométricos,” *Educación en Red*, May 7, 2014, <https://www.educacionenred.pe/noticia/?portada=51752#ixzz55hMWBByr>.

media debate, UNT administration defended the implementation of the fingerprint readers as a measure to improve faculty accountability and transparency. The faculty union representatives countered that, while they supported the scrutiny and disciplining of delinquent faculty, they objected to the lack of informed consent regarding the use or protection of their biometric data, the coercion of faculty into providing their fingerprints, and the high visibility of biometric controls as a smokescreen for broader instances of corruption at the institution.³

In 2013, a similar situation played out at the Universidad de Granada, in Spain. In an open letter, the faculty union challenged the administration's plan to use biometric controls to audit faculty presence on campus.⁴ The union criticized the failure to consult the faculty about the new policy and argued that the use of biometric controls was invasive, punitive, and tarnished the public reputation of the entire faculty by implying that absenteeism was endemic on campus instead of a rare occurrence.⁵ Moreover, the union called into question the decision to make administrative and campus services staff responsible for overseeing faculty compliance with the new system—a situation that would not only increase the former's workload but also turn them into a de facto instrument of faculty surveillance.⁶

These two examples highlight a growing trend in universities around the world: the use of biometric controls to monitor academic staff. In this essay, we refer to such measures as *bioaccountability*, and position them as part of broader, hegemonic discourses of accountability, transparency, and efficiency, whose de facto intent is to create a docile, selectively productive academic body. Focusing in the case of Mexico, we explore the “petty” managerial technologies of audit and surveillance—of which bioaccountability measures are a logical if perverse extension—that shape the lives of faculty. We draw on personal experience at three Mexican public universities to illustrate their chilling impact on academic culture, including the gradual erosion of academic freedom.

Of course, institutions and institutional actors have a duty to be responsible, open, and honest about their operations and their contributions to society. Yet our point in this essay is that the wholesale, uncritical consumption of accountability discourses can mask dynamics that effectively threaten academic freedom, although not in the overt, sometimes violent forms of academic repression documented around the world. In

³ Zavaleta Urtecho, “Docentes de la UNT.”

⁴ Federación de Empleados y Empleadas de los Servicios Públicos, Unión General de Trabajadores (FeSP UGT), Universidad de Granada, “Campaña recogida firmas control presencial,” *La Cafetera*, November 11, 2013, <https://feteugtugr.wordpress.com/2013/11/27/campana-recogida-firmas-control-presencial/>.

⁵ FeSP UGT, Universidad de Granada, “Sobrecarga horaria y control presencial: Celebrada reunión de profesores,” September 19, 2013, <https://ugtugr.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/sobrecarga-horaria-y-control-presencial-celebrada-reunion-de-profesores/>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

this sense, our intent in this essay is not to shift the focus away from such egregious violations of academic freedom but rather to extend our understanding of how seemingly benign audit and accountability technologies can be deployed as instruments of faculty control and docilization without inviting comparisons to overtly repressive regimes.

As numerous scholars have pointed out, the restructuring of the academic labor force and the ensuing growth of non-tenure-track (and nonunionized) faculty ranks is one of the most effective means to diminish collective action and weaken the protections of academic freedom. Yet where completely eliminating the protections of tenure to retain highly skilled knowledge producers may not be politically feasible, the need to reign in and control faculty remains. A managerial ideology that embeds academics in a labor environment with high degrees of audit, inspection, and surveillance is ideal for this purpose since, given sufficient time, it produces docile bodies “in a self-reinforcing process of self-discipline through which [faculty] invest themselves psychically and emotionally” in dominant discourses of proper professional behavior.⁷ In the next section we extend this idea through a brief overview of Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower and how it applies to the management of the academic workforce.

Biopower and the Academic Racehorse

Foucault argued that in absolutist regimes, governing had as its main objective repelling threats to the absolute authority of the king over the territories to which he laid claim. In contrast, in modern, liberal societies, governing is concerned not with territory or sovereignty but rather with the productive welfare of the population. To govern a liberal state means “exercising toward its inhabitants, and the wealth of behavior of each and all, a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of the family over his household and his goods.”⁸ In this conceptualization of government, property and territory are no more than useful variables in the management of the complex formed by humans and things. Rather than thinking of power as a top-down planning process emanating from state agencies, Foucault stressed the need, as Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis put it, to “engage with a power that does not simply prohibit or

⁷ Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein, “Managing the Research Imagination? Globalisation and Research in Higher Education,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4, no. 2 (2006): 226–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720600752619>.

⁸ Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Essential Foucault*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: New Press, 2003), 234.

repress, a power that is dispersed, that circulates—a power that does not exist outside relations but produces relations.”⁹ In other words, a mentality of government, or governmentality.

After Foucault, Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose conceptualized power as “productive of meanings, of interventions, of entities, of processes, of objects, of written traces and of lives.”¹⁰ Their main concern was contemporary programs, techniques, and strategies of governmentality, what they call the “little engineers of the human soul, and their mundane knowledges, techniques and procedures.”¹¹ As such, power is distributed along loosely affiliated networks of interests and materialized in instruments of financial control, performance measurement, and audit applied to the faculty’s teaching and research functions. The growth of managerial professionals tasked with oversight of these tasks is an important element in the legitimization and normalization of these regimes of audit and surveillance.

Equally important to this normalization is that individuals learn to identify their current position, to “calibrate themselves in relation to ‘where they should be,’ and devise ways of getting from one state to the other.”¹² That is, it is important that they learn self-discipline and compliance within the system. According to Foucault, the technologies of discipline seek to dissociate power from the body in two inextricable ways: (1) by channeling power into aptitudes or capacities that lead to desirable increases in terms of economic utility and (2) by diverting the flow of energy away from undesirable uses and behaviors. The ultimate goal of this biopower is to “have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.”¹³

Faculty, however, with the historical charge and protections of shared governance and academic freedom, present a unique challenge to managerial expectations of docility. As knowledge producers they fulfill a crucial role in maximizing the innovation and competitiveness so often presented as the *raison d’être* behind neoliberal restructuring in education. As such, from a managerial perspective, independence of mind and action are desirable attributes when channeled into knowledge creation and transfer. Yet the same independent streak, especially when linked to collective action, makes them difficult to govern.¹⁴ The

⁹ Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis, “Governmentality and the Sociology of Education: Media, Educational Policy and the Politics of Resentment,” in *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*, edited by Cameron McCarthy, Warren Crichlow, Greg Dimitriadis, and Nadine Dolby (New York: Routledge, 2005), 323.

¹⁰ Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1979), 138.

¹⁴ Boden and Epstein, “Managing the Research Imagination,” 231.

problem, from a managerial standpoint, is how to implement a racehorse model of academic productivity: They must gallop at top speed, but only when and where you want them to go.

Incentivos as a Biopower Tool in Mexican Universities

Scholars like Estela Bensimon and Imanol Ordorika have called attention to the widespread use of performance-based funding in Mexico as one such biopower technique for steering faculty. During the wave of structural reforms and the introduction of “new public management” techniques in the mid-1980s and 1990s, the Mexican government introduced a series of programs to encourage high-level performance of both institutions and individual faculty. Among the most prominent programs targeted at the faculty level were the National Researchers System (SNI, Sistema Nacional de Investigadores), the Program for the Improvement of the Professoriate (PROMEP, Programa de Mejoramiento del Profesorado), Academic Bodies (ABs), and institutional merit-pay programs (IMPPs).¹⁵ While PROMEP and ABs are targeted programs that provide funding for infrastructure and support research-related activities, the SNI and IMPPs were conceived as faculty merit-pay programs—*incentivos*—for faculty who meet research (and to a lesser degree, teaching and service) productivity targets.

Initially introduced as temporary measures to help faculty maintain their standard of living during one of the country’s worst financial crises,¹⁶ merit-pay programs like the SNI and IMPPs have become well-established, inextricable parts of both the funding structure and the rhythm of academic life in Mexico. Despite being targeted at individual faculty, participation in these programs has important implications for institutional accreditation and funding more broadly. Because federal allocations based on student enrollment are kept at a bare subsistence levels, institutions are expected to supplement their income through performance-based funding initiatives like the Integral Program for Institutional Improvement (PIFI, Programa Integral de Fortalecimiento Institucional) and the National Graduate Program Register (PNPC,

¹⁵ For a detailed history and description of these programs, see Jesús Francisco Galaz-Fontes and Manuel Gil-Antón, “The Impact of Merit-Pay Systems on the Work and Attitudes of Mexican Academics,” *Higher Education* 66, no. 3 (2013): 360–62.

¹⁶ Jesús Francisco Galaz-Fontes, Laura Elena Padilla-González, Manuel Gil-Antón, Juan José Sevilla-García, José Luis Arcos-Vega, Jorge Martínez-Stack, Sergio Martínez-Romo, Leonardo Jiménez-Loza, and María Elena Barrera-Bustillos, “Mexican Academics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century: Who Are They and How Do They Perceive Their Work, Institutions and Public Policies (A Preliminary Analysis),” *RIHE International Seminar Reports: The Changing Academic Profession in International Comparative and Quantitative Perspectives* 12 (September 2008): 347, <http://ids.hof.uni-halle.de/documents/t1782.pdf#page=354>.

Padrón Nacional de Posgrados de Calidad). Eligibility in these programs is, in turn, largely contingent on faculty performance as indicated by their SNI, IMPP, and PROMEP status.¹⁷

Thus, since faculty participation in merit-pay schemes has a significant impact on an institution's ability to secure basic operational funding, there is a built-in institutional inducement to ensure that faculty meet the productivity targets required by these programs. Something similar takes place for individual faculty. At most institutions, the base salaries of faculty do not keep pace with inflation and increases in living expenses; this creates a powerful enticement for faculty to pursue merit-pay eligibility. Moreover, while the base salaries of faculty across all ranks in the prestige ladder created by the SNI and IMPPs status are relatively similar, for those at the top levels, income from merit-pay programs can represent up to 50 percent of individual faculty members' total annual compensation¹⁸—a staggering proportion by any reckoning.

Although merit-pay schemes are neither new nor unique to Mexico, the manner of their implementation in Mexican higher education is believed to have had a significant and detrimental impact on academic labor and culture. With such high-stakes implications for individual income, the programs foster a hyperindividualistic academic culture and the loss of faculty solidarity. The imperative of competing for a livable wage creates subtle but powerful barriers to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and to academic freedom, as “the mind-set and practices of academics as individuals and collectively change radically to fit into a context where monetary value is attached to academic products according to how much they weigh on the globalized scale of prestige and excellence.”¹⁹

The extensive bureaucratic apparatus needed to run the multiple, mutually enforcing evaluation and audit programs—of which merit-pay schemes are a central component—has grown into a technology of control and surveillance with the power to steer academic work toward activities and products that generate the greatest economic benefit. As a biopower tool, the *estímulos* are formidable in steering a faculty historically known for its independence through positive incentives that invite compliance and complicity.²⁰ In contrast, with its focus on negative reinforcement, bioaccountability emerges as the “shadow” side of audit and surveillance regimes. We now turn to our experience to highlight how the introduction of fingerprint readers

¹⁷ Galaz-Fontes and Gil-Antón, “The Impact of Merit-Pay Systems,” 361–62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 366.

¹⁹ Estela Bensimon and Imanol Ordorika, “Mexico’s Estímulos: Faculty Compensation Based on Piecework,” in *The University, State, and Market: The Political Economy of Globalization in the Americas*, edited by Robert A. Rhodes and Carlos Alberto Torres (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 265.

²⁰ After all, there is no need to forcibly silence academics who are too preoccupied with the endless minutiae upon which their earnings depend.

speaks to a broader managerial concern with faculty control, which encroaches on key aspects of academic labor.

Bioaccountability as Creeping Managerial Overreach

To the best of our knowledge, unlike the cases at the Universidad Nacional de Trujillo or Universidad de Granada, the introduction of the fingerprint scanners as a bioaccountability measure has not been met with overt faculty resistance at Mexican institutions.²¹ Blanca was an adjunct faculty member at the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua when the fingerprint scanners were first introduced in the early 2000s. There was a quiet mundanity about the process: Upon arriving on campus one morning, faculty and students noted that a new device had been installed by the main administrative office in our building. The device was nonoperational for several weeks, during which rumors swirled about its intended use. Eventually, faculty learned that they would be required to scan their fingerprints upon arriving in the building and before leaving for the day. Faculty grumbled among themselves about the new policy, but there was never an organized attempt to push back against it.

For adjunct faculty like Blanca—whose salaries were determined by the number of class hours taught per semester, with no compensation for class preparation, time spent grading assignments, meeting with students, and so on—the measure seemed especially intrusive and ominous, since no information was made available about how the data gleaned from our entries would be used, for whom, and for what purposes other than ensuring professors were in fact in class at the designated times. Nor was there ever any communication about how our biodata would be stored or protected. Faculty were simply expected to comply or else have their pay withheld indefinitely.

In María Elena's case, the biometric control policy was already in place by the time she was hired at her current institution²²—a regional satellite of the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ-Cuauhtémoc). However, both the requirements of the policy and its enforcement have gradually intensified over time, resulting in a far-reaching bioaccountability and surveillance apparatus. For example, during María Elena's first semester on campus, the policy was that faculty must scan their fingerprints at the end of each class. As of this writing, the policy is that faculty must scan their fingerprints at the beginning and the end of class. Late or missing scans receive a penalty fee calculated as a percentage of total class time and deducted

²¹ This was certainly the case in our experience at the three institutions we focus on in this essay.

²² As was the case at the UACH, new faculty did not receive any information about how the data would be used, stored, or protected.

from a professor's monthly paycheck unless his or her presence during the entire class period can be verified. How verified? These days, the program director can vouch for the faculty member and manually overturn a late or missing scan (as often happens when a professor is running from one class to the next). A few years ago, an additional measure was in place: A prefect whose function was to walk the hallways to monitor that faculty were in fact in class at the designated times. This position was eventually phased out when it became evident that faculty absenteeism or chronic lateness was in fact rare. Regardless, the fingerprint scanners (and the financial penalty scheme) remained.

Other measures of bioaccountability have likewise become more restrictive over time. During María Elena's first weeks in her program, she made sure to register her presence in class through the fingerprint scanner and to maintain regular office hours to meet with students. Every day she worked on research- and service-related activities in her office for a few hours before switching to working from home. A few weeks into the semester, an administrator²³ publicly admonished her, stating that all faculty were required to remain on campus for a full eight-hour shift. María Elena explained that such a policy was not made explicit in her contract and that—in addition to never failing to fulfill any of her teaching or service duties—there was documentation available (for example, emails) showing that she was in fact working from home. The eight-hour shift requirement, she was told, was nonnegotiable. Not wanting to antagonize the administration, in the next few days she rearranged her schedule to arrive on campus at 7:00 a.m.—her peak productivity time—break for lunch at noon, then end her shift at 4:00 p.m. A few days later she was told this too was unacceptable, since there would be no administrative staff on hand to verify her arrival time. She finally settled on an 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. schedule with no lunch break, after a somewhat baffling exchange about her right to determine whether and when to pause for food.

It would be easy to dismiss the managerial preoccupation with academic feeding times and the like as comical and petty, as indeed it is—on the surface. Yet as part of a cumulative, pervasive, sometimes opaque control apparatus, its implications are chilling. Consider, for example, how enforcement of the eight-hour shift for professors is achieved. Given the close distribution of office space, oftentimes direct observation by the administrator is enough to determine that a faculty member is absent. However, because this is a small campus, it is also common to rely on custodial staff to monitor and report on the whereabouts of faculty on

²³ Because of the sensitive nature of this information and the possibility of retaliation against María Elena we avoid naming the specific administrative position in this and related examples.

college grounds. This practice is well-known to faculty, but being categorically unofficial, it is hard to establish how and under what circumstances it takes place.²⁴

Still, this level of surveillance is not the most extreme example of which the authors have direct experience. Some years back, María Elena was hired as a tenure-track professor at Universidad de la Sierra Juárez, a teaching-oriented institution in southern Mexico. The bioaccountability measures there were far more stringent than anything either of us has experienced elsewhere. The class schedule was organized in such a way that all classes took place during morning hours, and afternoons were reserved for course prep as well as student- and service-related activities.²⁵ The strict observance of business hours was enforced by mandatory fingerprint scans at four designated times: At 8:00 a.m. upon arrival on campus, at 12:00 and 1:00 p.m. before and after lunch break, and at 5:00 p.m. before leaving campus. Late or missing scans would incur in financial penalties automatically deducted from the professor's paycheck. In an extreme version of the short-lived initiative at the UACJ-Cuauhtémoc, at the Universidad de la Sierra Juárez a dedicated cadre of prefects was on hand to monitor compliance with the following policies during office hours:

- If not in class, faculty must be in their office space at all times. Exceptions included bathroom breaks and attending meetings and other official business on campus. Faculty who were observed away from their offices at any other times were reported and formally reprimanded.
- No bathroom breaks during class time.
- No private conversations with colleagues allowed, either in the office space or in the hallways.
- No meetings with students allowed unless on strictly coursework-related business.
- Faculty with a legitimate medical reason to be away from campus must obtain four signatures (that is, vice chancellor, human resources, graduate college, and the dean of

²⁴ This calls to mind the faculty union complaint at the Universidad de Granada, where the administration sought to make *personal administrativo y de servicios* (PAS, administrative and campus services staff) responsible for monitoring compliance with the biometric control system. See FeSP UGT Universidad de Granada, "Sobrecarga horaria."

²⁵ This is a common scheduling practice at Mexican universities. See Blanca Minerva Torres-Olave, "Imaginative Geographies: Identity, Difference, and English as the Language of Instruction in a Mexican University Program," *Higher Education* 63, no. 3 (2012): 317–35.

students) to be excused with no salary penalty. (Some faculty chose to simply stay home and take the salary penalty.)

The official justification for these measures was that faculty should dedicate themselves exclusively to university-related work (which at this institution meant primarily teaching), and that without this type of enforcement, rampant absenteeism would ensue. However, behind closed doors faculty conjectured that the policy stemmed from the administration's desire to curtail faculty involvement in political activism—in particular any activity associated with the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación*, the powerful teacher's union in Mexico. The most blatant giveaway was the presence of armed guards at the campus gate, whose known—but unofficial—duty was to prevent students from leaving the premises when there was so much as a whisper of a teacher's strike or some other form of organized protest in the region.

As one can imagine, compliance with these policies had a direct impact not only on faculty morale but also on their ability to carry out essential aspects of their work. Although faculty were technically free to pursue research and publication, the strict bioaccountability measures meant that conducting research-related activities was difficult, if not impossible. Faculty who wished to attend conferences or professional development activities away from town—as María Elena did—were told they could do so, but that the days or hours they spent away from campus would be deducted from their paychecks. Fieldwork was similarly impacted, as being away from campus during office hours also signaled noncompliance with bioaccountability measures.

Unsurprisingly, the institution had a dismal faculty retention record. With no union or structure for collective voice, and subject to an authoritative, repressive managerial culture, new faculty soon found the conditions intolerable. A morbid pastime among the hardier professors was to place bets on how long a new hire would last. The record for fastest departure was one week. María Elena left at the end of her first semester.

The Normalization of Bioaccountability as a Threat to Academic Freedom

The bioaccountability measures we describe above are troubling on several levels. At the most basic level, there is a Taylorist logic behind these policies, an assumption that getting faculty to follow rigid timetables in which specific tasks are performed, completed, and accounted for will lead to greater productivity. This logic entails a willful misunderstanding of the reality of academic work: learning is not linear and does not occur

exclusively in the classroom; the ability to communicate with and exchange ideas with colleagues is a central aspect of innovation and intellectual crosspollination; flexible work environments can foster productivity and creativity, and so on.²⁶ The intensive monitoring and regulation of academic staff results in an encroachment on academic life that may in fact harm faculty productivity and stifle creative, innovative thought. In setting up conditions where productivity and efficiency is fetishized and both creativity and critical thought are discouraged, bioaccountability effectively precludes the possibility of the type of “virtualities”—“moments in which the creation of new concepts allows a new problematic (that is, new kinds of questions and the intellectual structures around them) to take hold”—that Bruce Janz has eloquently argued are only possible in the presence of academic freedom.²⁷

In addition, some of these policies, especially those that involve placing restrictions on faculty’s ability to communicate with colleagues and students, may in fact impinge on basic liberties under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights²⁸ as well as under the Mexican Constitution, which states, “The right to peacefully associate or assemble for any licit purpose cannot be restricted..”²⁹ The presence of armed guards to keep students from attending social protests cannot be construed as anything but in violation of their right to peaceful association. Yet even the less extreme measures signal a level of managerial control that is difficult for outsiders to comprehend. The larger question is, why, in a country where universities have historically held significant political power, this level of overt and covert control over faculty goes unchallenged. Here it is crucial to consider the broader context in which bioaccountability techniques come to be implemented and normalized. At all three institutions, these techniques took place in the name of greater transparency and productivity, thus placing them on an equal footing with the expansive audit trail for research, teaching, and service productivity that faculty already maintain in the complex system of performance-based funding, including the SNI, PROMEP, ABs, IMPPs, PIFI, and PNPC, among others. The *incentivos* programs and the bioaccountability measures described in this essay thus represent two complementary sides of the faculty steering mechanism: the carrot and the stick.

One of the most problematic aspects of these bioaccountability policies—especially in their most extreme versions—is thus how easily they become part of the fabric of the broader efficiency and accountability regime. There is an element of personal shame at play, in that questioning or protesting these policies may be

²⁶ Not to mention that the requirement to be physically present for eight hours straight assumes a body unconstrained by physical need or limitation, as well as one that can extract itself from the concerns of family care. In Mexican society this still typically means a male, able-bodied subject.

²⁷ Bruce Janz, “Free Space in the Academy,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 7 (2016): 1–17.

²⁸ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 20.

²⁹ Mexican Constitution (amend. 2015), title I, chap. 1. art. 9.

construed as evidence of offending faculty trying to cover their tracks. Academic freedom is curtailed not through any overt challenge to the faculty's ability to speak their minds either in their research (or even activism) but rather through the establishment of a docility regime that effectively bypasses the need for more overt displays of power or repression.

The Tame Faculty

In Mexico, resistance to the early (and since refined) instruments to monitor faculty performance and to establish aspirational hierarchies of productivity (with monetary rewards attached to them) is now virtually nil. Is the same true of any real, organized, collective opposition to the type of bioaccountability described in this essay? It is difficult to tell. There is evidence that it is possible for faculty to challenge these measures. Faculty at the UACJ-Cauhtémoc campus have recently resisted administrative calls for additional bioaccountability requirements, including mandatory fingerprint scans upon arrival on and departure from campus, on the grounds that they would negatively impact research activities such as fieldwork and conference attendance.³⁰ This is a heartening development, and it brings to the fore the need for overt, collective, organized action by faculty in resisting policies with such a deleterious impact on academic culture. Much like a muscle, the collective voice of faculty must be exercised regularly, lest it atrophy.

The consequences of losing that muscle memory are cause for concern. As faculty grow used to more authoritative managerial styles and expectations, they become increasingly unable or unwilling to challenge policies that infringe directly on more traditional understandings of academic freedom, including the ability to make curricular decisions and determine the criteria under which students' learning and evaluation takes place. Blanca's experience as an adjunct at Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua speaks to this. In the mid-2000s, not long after the biometric controls were introduced, the university was under strong political pressure to admit more students. Some of the larger, pressing societal concerns in the state of Chihuahua—mounting violence and insecurity related to the war on drug cartels—led to widespread concerns about the university's inability to provide seats for the growing number of high school graduates. To address this discontent, the university rector issued an edict to expand admissions across all academic units. Blanca's program, which specialized in training EFL teachers and translators, was charged with doubling enrollments in the coming fall. This was concerning to faculty in two ways: first, with no additional investment in infrastructure, the school building could not physically hold a twofold student increase in classrooms that

³⁰ As was the case during María Elena's time at the Universidad de la Sierra Juárez.

were already at capacity. Second, being a program where applicants were expected to demonstrate a relatively high written and oral English proficiency to be admitted, doubling the number of admissions would effectively require the program to admit students who would struggle to keep up with coursework even in the first semester of classes. Without additional teaching staff to accommodate a much larger cohort (with a very different instructional profile), the quality of instruction would be adversely affected, especially as students moved from introductory courses into the intensive (and English-only) seminar-style upper classes.

The program faculty scheduled a meeting with the academic director for the university, where as a group they expressed these concerns. The academic director took a belligerent tone and stated that the requirement to double enrollments was not up for discussion, nor would there be additional funds for staff or infrastructure. Blanca asked what faculty were supposed to do about the 50 percent of incoming students who would be clearly ill-prepared to cope with first-year course requirements.

“Flunk them,” he shrugged.

“So, we’ll essentially be admitting students, taking their time and tuition money, knowing full well they will not make it past their first semester. How is this a responsible policy?”

“That’s not your problem.”

“It *is* our problem, we’re here to teach.”

With a sharp look he spat back, “Who the hell are *you*?”

As an adjunct faculty member—a nobody, as far as the academic director was concerned—the fact that Blanca was silenced is troubling but perhaps unsurprising. Yet the silence that followed was telling. No one in the group, which included at least four tenured faculty, dared follow that exchange. They had much to lose, politically speaking, from direct confrontation with upper administration. The meeting ended soon after. This was a clear example of the de facto inability of faculty to advocate for the welfare of students, to speak against unreasonable expectations of efficiency and productivity, and to demand adequate support to perform the tasks expected of them. The alarming aspect of these practices is how they gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, become normalized—and how subtly the same habit of acquiescence weakens resistance to further encroachment on faculty labor and academic freedom.

Concluding Thoughts: Context Matters

This final anecdote illustrates the importance of positional power when considering the normalization of audit and surveillance regimes. Blanca's experience reminds us that, as the protections of academic freedom do not typically extend to contingent faculty, the latter may be especially vulnerable under authoritarian managerialist regimes. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind how tenured and tenure-track faculty are incentivized to remain silent through both the positive and negative reinforcement mechanisms detailed in this essay.

Likewise, an element that sometimes gets lost in discussions about academic freedom is the fact that context matters. The invocation of context usually takes place in scholarly examinations of academic freedom in different systems around the world, or in discussions concerning the inadequacy of US-centric definitions of the term.³¹ However, it is just as important to consider how issues of institutional stratification, prestige, and region may play a role in the uneven enforcement of academic freedom protections within a university system. The fact that the examples of bioaccountability we discuss in this essay took place at regional universities (or satellite campuses) rather than at some of the more powerful, prestigious institutions in the country is significant. A similar escalation of bioaccountability measures might not be possible at flagship or politically active campuses where faculty have a critical mass and a strong, collective voice.

Similarly, not all programs at the same institution may be impacted equally. At María Elena's satellite campus, the surveillance seems to be concentrated mostly in programs with a high research activity, and which feature prominently in the institution's accreditation and performance-based funding eligibility. Considering the key role that such research-intensive programs may play in securing accreditation and performance-based funds for the institution, it is not a stretch to see the bioaccountability measures as an extension of institutional strategies to manage resource dependency. We hope this essay serves as a cautionary tale of how, in practice, such strategies can become perverted, with deleterious effects on academic labor and academic freedom.

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³¹ Jennifer H. Ruth, "Academic Freedom in an Age of Mistrust," *Journal of Academic Freedom* 7 (2016), <https://www.aaup.org/JAF7/editors-introduction-volume-7#>.

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