Educational Considerations

Volume 14 | Number 1 Article 7

1-1-1987

A Perspective on Issues Facing the Professoriate

Jay L. Chronister

Recommended Citation

Chronister, Jay L. (1987) "A Perspective on Issues Facing the Professoriate," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 14: No. 1. https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1652

If higher education is to remain a vital and viable social institution, it must place a premium on academic self-renewal.

A Perspective on Issues Facing the Professoriate

by Jay L. Chronister

It is widely recognized by leaders in higher education that the most critical investment that colleges and universities make is in the human capital that we call faculty. It is also generally accepted that the quality and vitality of these institutions is a function of the quality and vitality of their faculties. As colleges and universities chart their way through the remainder of the 20th century, many of the critical problems they will be required to address will involve this most valuable resource, their faculty.

The literature on higher education has chronicled the issues of enrollment uncertainty, changes in client populations, changing societal expectations, quality concerns, issues of financial support and cost constraints, and the impact of high technology as challenges facing institutions for the years ahead. Each of these general problem areas has significant implications for the professoriate.

Recent History

In order to understand the issues facing the professoriate it is necessary to review the recent history of higher education as the context for the current situation. The significant growth of higher education during the 1960s and the early 1970s provided a highly supportive job market for the professoriate. Between 1960 and 1970 the number of full-time faculty employed in higher education more than doubled,[1] and during the peak years, new additions to the professoriate were being made at the rate of 20,000 or more per year.[2] During these same years the employment market in colleges and universities provided for high mobility for faculty who utilized interinstitutional job changes as a means of achieving rapid advancement in rank and salary.[3]

The economic climate for faculty was also highly supportive in terms of significant increases in salary and real income. In constant dollars faculty compensation increased by 41.2 percent between 1959-60 and 1969-70.[4] In the 1970s the economic climate began to change significantly. Inflationary economic conditions coupled with a stabilization and subsequent declines in enrollment resulted in losses in potential mobility and real income. According to the 1980-81 AAUP Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, real salaries of faculty declined by 21 percent during the '70s.[5] Typifying the situation as higher education entered the '80s was the change in real income between 1979-80 and 1980-81 when faculty salaries, on average, increased by 8.7 percent in current dollars while the Consumer Price Index rose by 11.6 percent.[6] In its 1984-85 analysis, the AAUP reported an average combined salary increase of 6.6 percent for all ranks and categories against an estimated 4.0 percent increase in price-level increases.[7] This is the fourth straight year of real salary increases, with the previous three years reflecting smaller gains. Although real salary gains appear to have begun to improve the economic status of the professoriate in recent years, there remains the need for further improvement to recoup the purchasing power lost in the '70s.

Of possibly more significance to the professoriate, and to higher education in general, are other issues created by the age and tenure status of the professoriate. Because of the significant influx of new, young faculty members in the late 1960s and early 1970s, higher education entered the decade of the '80s with a relatively young professoriate. A recent report by TIAA/CREF provided data indicating that nearly 46 percent of their policy holders were in the age range of 36 to 50.[8] In a similar vein, Novotny provided data which showed that in the late 1970s the median age of faculty was approximately 42, and that the median age would reach 50 to 52 by 1995.[9] In addition to the professoriate being relatively young, it is also characterized as being highly tenured. In 1980, the Carnegie Council estimated that nearly 75 percent of faculty in four-year institutions were tenured. The Council also reported the modal age of those tenured faculty to be 36 to 45 in 1980 and that it would not be until the year 2000 that the modal age would reach 56 to 65.[10] The 1978 amendments to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act which raised the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70 (for higher education effective July 1, 1982) had the net effect of adding five additional years to the career of all faculty members.

The situation facing the professoriate is further shaped by economic and demographic variables over which it has no control. College enrollments have begun to decrease due primarily to a reduction in the size of the traditional college-age population, with this decline projected to continue until approximately 1995. Compounding the problems of declines in enrollment are state financial constraints created by the general economy and a reduction in federal support for higher education, especially in terms of student aid programs. These constraints on financial aid programs further exacerbate the enrollment problem.

The Implications

All of the above issues and recent history create problems for the professoriate. For aspirants to faculty positions, as well as for young faculty just beginning their careers, the future is rather bleak. The Carnegie Council has projected that net additions to the professoriate for the remainder of the century will be about zero.[11] This problem, created by enrollment decline and the current age and tenure structure of the professoriate, will be especially damaging to the career opportunities of women and minorities. The opportunities for potential women and minority faculty members will be constrained primarily to acquiring positions which become vacant through retirements of current faculty, which as noted above will be rather minimal.

Compounding the problem for young, untenured faculty are institutional concerns with the high ratios which has caused many institutions to invoke environmental issues such as program demand, staffing flexibility, and

Jay L. Chronister is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

budgetary constraints into the tenure award decision process. Therefore, scholarship and quality of teaching are no longer the sole criteria for achieving security in the professoriate. To promote staffing flexibility and to control costs, many institutions can be expected to appoint junior faculty to non-tenure term appointments of one to three years, and to increase the use of part-time faculty. As a result of this "academic depression" it is widely believed that the professoriate will lose a generation of bright young scholars which will have a long-term negative impact on higher education and society.

Currently employed senior faculty are not immune from this milieu. Loss of interinstitutional mobility, the loss of real income cited earlier, the threat of loss of positions as a result of program discontinuance, and the loss of the intellectual challenge provided by scholarly junior faculty are obvious issues facing tenured faculty. Beyond these obvious issues though, there are other, often more subtle challenges.

During times of financial constraints higher education has deferred maintenance of its human capital as surely as it has deferred maintenance of its physical facilities. In both cases, the long-term effects are expensive. In recent years many colleges and universities have cut funds for faculty travel to professional meetings, restricted expenditures for supplies and materials, deferred the purchase of necessary instructional and research equipment, and reduced secretarial staff in the interests of cost containment. While often critically necessary to the financial health of institutions on a short-term basis, such actions have the potential in the long-term of leading to intellectual stagnation and the diminution of faculty productivity in scholarship, instruction and service.

At a time when institutions are faced with the challenges of changing client populations and the impact of new technologies it is important that faculty be provided with the resources necessary to respond to these challenges. For some members of the professoriate it will be necessary to develop new skills in order to respond to the opportunities presented by technological advances, and for others it may necessitate developing expertise in emerging fields of inquiry and instruction. In each case it is important that the institutional administration and the faculty view the need for professional enhancement and development as a mutually beneficial endeavor. Such activities require the commitment of resources and time on the part of both the institution and the professoriate.

Summary

If higher education is to remain a vital and viable social institution during the remainder of this century, it must place a premium on academic self-renewal. During the remainder of this century when the opportunity to provide for new ideas and new skills through hiring new faculty will be severely constrained, the provision for academic self-renewal of existing faculty resources gains increased significance. It is also important that the professoriate recognize the mutuality of institutional interests and self-interests in meeting these challenges.

Notes

1. **Digest of Education Statistics,** 1979. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, p. 104.
2. The Carnegie Council. **Three Thousand Futures: The Next Twenty Years for Higher Education.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1980, p. 305.
3. Allan Cartter. **Ph.D's and the Academic Labor Market.** New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976, p. 161.
4. The Carnegie Council. **Three Thousand Futures,** p. 297.
5. "The Rocky Road Through the 1980s: Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 1980-81." **Academe** 67 (August 1981) pp. 210-233.
6. Ibid.
7. "Starting the Upward Climb?: The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 1984-85." **Academe** 71 (March-April 1985), p. 3.
8. **Report on Early Retirement.** New York: Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association/College Retirement Equities Fund, (November 1982) p. 4.
9. Novotny, Janet. **Mandatory Retirement of Higher Education Faculty.** Washington, D.C.: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 197 693, 1981, p. 2.
10. The Carnegie Council, **Three Thousand Futures,** p. 82.
11. The Carnegie Council, **Three Thousand Futures,** p. 305.

https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations/vol14/iss1/7
DOI: 10.4148/0146-9282.1652