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2009

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Generation X: Redefining the Norms of the Academy

Abstract

[Excerpt] The members of Generation X are the young faculty members of today and the immediate future. The panelists at this session of the conference were asked to discuss the effects of this generation on academic norms and institutional governance and the types of new models that may be emerging for academia as a result of them. More specifically, they were asked if the attitudes and loyalties of these young faculty members really do differ from that of the Baby Boom Generation, how their attitudes and behavior affect graduate programs, what academic institutions will need to do to attract the next generation of faculty members, and how they will influence governance in academia. And given the growing number of two-career families and single parent families, will changes in the tenure system take place?

Keywords

higher education, faculty, employment, Generation X

Disciplines

Higher Education | Labor Economics | Labor Relations

Comments

Suggested Citation

Ehrenberg, R. G. (2009). Generation X: Redefining the norms of the academy [Electronic version]. In D. Heller & M. B. d'Ambrosio (Eds.), *Generational shockwaves and the implications for higher education* (pp. 30-40). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.

Required Publisher Statement

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3. Generation X: redefining the norms of the academy

Ronald G. Ehrenberg

INTRODUCTION

The members of Generation X are the young faculty members of today and the immediate future. The panelists at this session of the conference were asked to discuss the effects of this generation on academic norms and institutional governance and the types of new models that may be emerging for academia as a result of them. More specifically, they were asked if the attitudes and loyalties of these young faculty members really do differ from that of the Baby Boom Generation, how their attitudes and behavior affect graduate programs, what academic institutions will need to do to attract the next generation of faculty members, and how they will influence governance in academia. And given the growing number of two-career families and single parent families, will changes in the tenure system take place?

The panel, which it was my pleasure to moderate, consisted of four distinguished academic leaders. Linda Bunnell has been the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point since 2004. Prior to assuming that position, she was a Senior Vice President at the College Board, the Chancellor of the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs for the Minnesota State System, and a consultant to higher education and non-profit organizations.

Joan Girgus has been a Professor of Psychology at Princeton University for 30 years. She has served Princeton in a variety of administrative positions, including Dean of the College, Chair of the Psychology Department, and (currently) Special Assistant to the Dean of the Faculty. In the latter role, she was one of the people responsible for Princeton's policies and programs that seek to make graduate education and faculty life more "family-friendly." She is well-known in the higher education community for her extensive national leadership activities, including her work with the Knight Higher Education Collaborative and her leadership in the Pew Higher Education Roundtable program.

John Lombardi became the President of the Louisiana State University System in September 2007. Prior to his appointment, he served as Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, President of the University of Florida, Provost at the Johns Hopkins University, and Dean of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University. He is co-editor of the Center for Measuring University Performance and writes a regular column for InsideHigherEd.com.

The final panelist, Kenneth Ruscio, became the President of Washington and Lee University in March 2006. An alumnus of Washington and Lee, he is a distinguished scholar in the study of democratic theory and public policy. Previously he served as Dean of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond and in various administrative positions at Washington and Lee.

THE PARTICIPANTS' REMARKS

Linda Bunnell led off the panel and stressed the importance of creating institutions in which Generation Xers can thrive. She began by cautioning that many of the characteristics attributed to this generation are also characteristics that have often been attributed to faculty more generally. These include that they identify with their disciplines, rather than with their institutions or even their departments; that they value only those things that help them to succeed; that they are resistant to authority and behave like individual contractors; and that they challenge each other's thinking.

On the other hand, as she works to adapt her leadership style and her leadership team to work with this generation, she is aware of many other important aspects that they possess. They are good leaders with a strong sense of competency, they spend a lot of time acquiring information on their own and are very savvy technologically, they are drawn to teams of their own choosing, and they are very creative and find routines repetitive and distasteful. Two key words that describe them are "balance" and "family" and she noted what a contrast this was to the start of her and other Baby Boomer careers when family responsibilities had to be kept in the background and were not allowed to intrude upon one's professional work.

The University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point (UWSP) is a large comprehensive institution located in a beautiful scenic area of the state. It grew rapidly after World War II and the social norms of the faculty at UWSP were established by that generation of faculty. These include dedication to students, formality, dignity, high expectations for students, and civility towards each other and towards administrators. However, due to

retirement and growth, almost 40 percent of the faculty now are Generation Xers. To understand better the policies needed to help UWSP prosper in such an environment, in 2004 UWSP participated in the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute survey of faculty.

The results of that survey were quite striking to Linda Bunnell and they suggested that Generation Xers at UWSP differ from their older colleagues in a number of ways. Among the key findings were that the former were more stressed about household responsibilities and finances, as well as professional matters. While some of these differences may relate to their different stage of the life cycle, almost 40 percent of them reported that they had received at least one job offer during the last two years and roughly an equal percentage reported that they were thinking about leaving academia. Both of these percentages were considered much higher than is desirable and suggest real issues of commitment to their institution and to academia more generally.

As a result, UWSP has responded with a variety of efforts. It has developed an outstanding orientation program and a mentoring program for new faculty. It is bringing in speakers to talk about stress management and balancing work and family matters. It has adopted family-friendly policies, including time off for birth, adoption, and family illness, hosted family events on campus, provided child care on campus (starting as early as age one), and provided assistance to spouses seeking employment.

Given the numbers of people contemplating employment elsewhere, UWSP allows faculty to try out academic positions elsewhere, rather than requiring them to resign; the hope is that some will realize that the “grass is not greener” elsewhere. It also allows a transition to part-time employment for faculty who want to pursue non-academic options locally.

Finally, it is very strategic in its recruitment of new faculty. It has a program to attract back to campus graduates of UWSP who have gone on to graduate study elsewhere; these individuals come to faculty positions with more institutional loyalty than the typical new faculty hire. It also makes special efforts to attract faculty with interests in the area’s beautiful outdoor environment and in hunting and fishing; such faculty are also more likely to remain at the institution than faculty who long for an urban environment.

Joan Girgus’s discussion focused on the importance of rebalancing the work–family–life relationship. She pointed out that Generation Xers in academia are ethnically and racially much more diverse than their Baby Boomer counterparts. Echoing Linda Bunnell’s description, they are self-reliant, value diversity, desire work–life balance, are technologically savvy, and are attached to their work but not necessarily to their employers.

Two defining events happened right before Generation Xers were born and while they were very young: the civil rights movement and the women’s

liberation movement. As a result of these events, they are the first generation that has always believed that both men and women will be in the labor force and that careers and families will proceed at the same time. Thus, they are deeply concerned about work–life balance issues. And given the substantial increase in the share of college and university faculty that is female, these issues have become increasingly important for academia to address.

When addressing these issues, Girgus stressed that a number of key points must be kept in mind. First, consideration of work–life balance issues should begin while potential future faculty members are in graduate school and continue throughout faculty careers and into retirement. Second, work–life balance for Generation Xers matters as much for men as it does for women. Third, a multiplicity of services and programs must be provided because different individuals will have different needs; one size does not fit all.

Academic institutions have always been concerned about family life issues. However, in an earlier generation, when most faculty members were males and their spouses had the primary child care responsibilities, the needs of faculty in this area were much smaller. Policies such as tuition remission and family health insurance coverage were about all that were needed. However, a much wider range of policies are needed today.

Princeton University has been in the forefront of the development of family-friendly policies at major research universities and Joan Girgus summarized some of the policies now in place at Princeton. These include maternity and paternity leave, automatic one-year extensions of the tenure clocks for assistant professors for each child that is born, workload relief for the primary caregiver in a family, back-up care programs (both for children and other family members), dependant care travel funds, employee child care assistance programs, expanded on-campus child care facilities, employee assistance programs that provide counseling on a wide variety of issues (including finding a child care provider or a day care center for elder care), and partner placement assistance. And, she stressed that in each case these policies either also cover graduate students and postdoctoral research associates, or there are parallel policies that cover these groups. In each case, the policies are designed to facilitate the covered individuals doing their academic work.

However, in spite of Princeton's great efforts, Girgus feels there is still more that can be done. She thinks that maternity/paternity leaves might be made longer than Princeton's policies currently provide. She believes that adoption assistance programs, such as the one that UWSP has, are necessary. And more generally, she believes that universities need to think seriously about redesigning their employment structures to allow for long-term, part-time tenured faculty employment so that individuals can more

easily combine parenting and work. She also discussed the importance of academia thinking more seriously about what she calls “off ramps and on ramps.” An example of the latter type of policy, which she did not mention, is a policy that the University of California System has that provides post-doctoral appointments to PhDs who have been out of academia for a number of years raising their families, to allow them to retool and become competitive again for faculty appointments.¹

John Lombardi is well known for saying exactly what is on his mind and his comments at the conference were exactly in this vein. He questioned the usefulness of using the generational perspective around which the whole conference was organized. Moreover, he argued that given the heterogeneity of higher education institutions it is somewhat foolish to talk about the policies “higher education” should put in place in response to generational issues. Different institutions have different resource bases; some are much more heavily tuition-dependent than others and thus have to be much more sensitive to how the policies they adopt affect their tuition-paying customers. Many do not have the option of passing the expenses that family policies may entail on to their students.

As the president of a major public higher education system, he is very sensitive to how public institutions allocate resources. He pointed to the development of honors colleges at public universities as a possible misallocation of public resources. These colleges are designed to improve the academic profile of the entering class by attracting students with high test scores, who tend to come from higher-income families. Given that more resources are spent educating these students than an institution’s other students who have not been admitted to the honors colleges and who tend to come from lower-income families, he asked whether this allocation of resources is socially responsible.

Turning to for-profit higher education institutions, he pointed out that their goal is to produce higher education at a low cost so that they can earn a profit, so they do not invest in the type of amenities that most higher education institutions invest in and they relentlessly hold costs down by controlling faculty costs. He mused that if we as a society were interested in holding down the costs of higher education, we might emulate more what is going on in for-profit higher education rather than having discussions like the one the panel was having about the actions that might be undertaken to make faculty members happy and more productive.

Put simply, his point was that all of the programs designed to make the academy a more desirable place to work for Generation Xers cost money, and someone has to pay for those programs. At rich private institutions like Princeton, it may be possible to finance these costs out of endowment

income, but most public and private higher education institutions are heavily dependent on tuition and thus anything that adds to costs will necessarily result in higher tuition levels. Moreover, when budget crises come, and we look for places to cut, he worries that these programs will not even be considered for cuts; instead we will be forced to cut the core academic operations of our institutions.

Why don't discussions such as the panel's focus on how to reduce the costs of higher education? Lombardi asserted that colleges and universities are engaged in a "dog eat dog" competition to be the most prestigious institutions they can and as a result, all the pressure they face is to spend more, not less. So they keep piling on amenities to attract students, finance research facilities to attract faculty, spend fortunes on large athletic programs (which often have little to do with the academic mission of the university but which alumni and state legislatures like) and increasingly use grant aid to attract top students. They want to be the most prestigious that they can because this enables them to attract the very best students and faculty and to produce high-quality teaching and research.

Kenneth Ruscio's remarks were based upon his perspective as a political scientist and as president of a national liberal arts college that has a strong sense of tradition, a strong sense of norms, a strong sense of community, and a commitment to liberal arts education. Rather than addressing the types of policies needed to attract and retain Generation Xers as the other panelists did, his remarks focused on how this generation is influencing governance in higher education.

Ruscio pointed out that Generation Xers came of age during a time of mistrust and that, as Kennedy School of Government professor, Robert Putnam, has pointed out, a declining sense of community and commitment to common values. While this leads to a declining sense of trust in individual leaders and thus makes leadership in higher education more difficult, it is also associated with increasing trust by them in the process by which decisions are made, as things such as tenure and promotion processes, are subject to much more codification than in the past. He finds, from his experiences first as a dean and then as a president, that this is exactly what Generation Xers want. They want to know what the quantitative standards will be for both research and teaching that will determine whether they get tenure. He asserted that process is increasingly becoming the source of justice in their views and thus faculty and administrative decision-makers increasingly become hesitant about making substantive judgments; rather they seek to follow the prescribed process as closely as possible.

Curriculum reform is another example. It is increasingly difficult in his view to get individual faculty members and departments to think about

what the broad purpose of the curriculum is; instead the focus is on how any change will affect each department and even each individual faculty member. So bargaining and negotiations have replaced persuasion and the search for a common view or set of values in curriculum decisions.

Thus, even at a small liberal arts college such as his own, he feels that the changing generational norms have substantially affected academia. Academic discourse is less about discovering common purposes and more about negotiating differences between individuals and units. Trust in process has become as important as trust in subjective judgments. Leadership is increasingly about developing acceptable formats for negotiating conflicts as well as about gaining consensus on purpose. The challenge for small liberal arts colleges that are accustomed to high levels of consensus and a strong sense of community is to incorporate more formal procedures without losing a sense of common purpose.

AUDIENCE DISCUSSION AND MODERATOR'S THOUGHTS

During the discussion period, Joan Girgus was asked how tenure committees at Princeton react to individuals who have had their tenure clock delayed because of child birth. Would an assistant professor who had two children during the probationary years and was considered for tenure during her eighth year be held to the same standard as assistant professors without children who were considered for tenure during their sixth year? Girgus stressed that tenure committees are instructed that the "bar" for tenure should not be changed, but admitted that it is hard to know for sure how they are reacting. Princeton has urged tenure committees to evaluate the quality of a person's work and its impact on the field rather than simply counting publications in some quantitative and mechanical fashion. It hopes this will help keep the tenure "bar" unchanged.

As moderator, I perhaps should have pointed out after this question that Princeton is in a rather unique position; it is one of our nation's truly most selective academic institutions, in terms of its undergraduate student body, its graduate student body, and the academic stature of its faculty members. As such, its faculty may be much more willing and able to make qualitative judgments about their colleagues' professional accomplishments than the faculty at other institutions. This stands in stark contrast to Kenneth Ruscio's description of how tenure and promotion decisions are becoming more codified and numbers-driven at other institutions. So picking up on one of John Lombardi's points, the impact of Generation Xers on our academic institutions may well depend upon the characteristics of an institution;

where an institution is in the selectivity hierarchy clearly matters. So too does the nature of the institution. A selective national liberal arts college, such as Washington and Lee, has to evaluate in a very qualitative way teaching and advising as well as research (teaching and advising matter at research universities but are not given as much weight as research). So in some respects, the subjective judgments that must be made at national liberal arts colleges during the tenure process are much more multidimensional, which leads to greater attention to process at these institutions.

An institution's financial resources also clearly matter, as John Lombardi stressed in his remarks. During the discussion period, I noted that my institution, Cornell University, which is one of the wealthiest institutions in the nation, has an endowment per student that is less than one-eighth the size of Princeton's endowment per student. Thus, it is impossible for Cornell to afford to do all of the things that Princeton is doing in terms of family policies, just as it is impossible for Cornell to pay faculty salaries as high as Princeton, to have class sizes as small as Princeton's, and to have financial aid packages as generous as Princeton's. Institutions that are more poorly endowed than Cornell obviously face even more stringent financial constraints.

Another audience member noted the growing trend in higher education toward the use of part-time and full-time non-tenure track faculty members. He wondered if efforts to provide enhanced family policies for tenure track faculty members will be financed by a reduction in the number of full-time tenure track faculty and an increased growth in the number of contingent (non-tenure track) faculty. He noted that the tendency to use non-tenure track faculty was not the result of a generational change, but rather of the economic conditions facing higher education. However, the response of institutions to the generational change may hasten the rate of growth of contingent faculty.

John Lombardi responded that the different segments of the higher education market will respond differently to changes in economic conditions just as they will respond differently to the generational changes. He expects more institutions to offer forms of rolling five-year contracts in which some faculty will get paid well for specific responsibilities (teaching or research) and if they do well, institutions will have to compete with higher salaries to compensate them for the risk of not having tenure. To date, institutions do not do this, the highest-paid faculty members are the ones who have tenure or are on the tenure track. Such forms of contracts would give institutions more flexibility in meeting changes in demand for different disciplines and changes in economic conditions.

Still another audience member questioned how the emphasis on work-life issues plays out with single faculty members. She worried that this

emphasis may discourage single individuals (defined as people without partners) from entering academia because they will feel that they are not getting their “fair share” of the resources.

Joan Girgus responded that this does not appear to be an issue at Princeton. However, she acknowledged that this may be because Princeton has enough resources to provide whatever it takes to recruit, nurture, and retain the very best faculty members, regardless of family status. Whether lesser-endowed institutions will face the problem the audience member raised is an open question. Kenneth Ruscio noted that this issue fits neatly into his framework of academic institutions increasingly having to negotiate between the interests of different groups. And John Lombardi noted that this issue is not anything new; historically, academic institutions have devoted more resources per faculty member for family health insurance than they have for single health insurance coverage and some institutions have provided children’s college tuition benefits, which increases the cost of faculty with children relative to the cost of single and married faculty without children.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One comes away from the panel and the discussion that followed with a sense that Generation X has impacted both the way that colleges and universities are governed and the policies that they pursue. However, there are a number of important points that must be kept in mind.

First, virtually all of the changes that the panelists talked about are going on outside of academia as well as within. Our society has become much more litigious and therefore policies and procedures for hiring and discharge have been codified throughout the economy. The growing share of females in the labor force, among college graduates, and among advanced degree-holders (law, medicine, business, and PhDs) has led corporations to worry about family policies and promotion policies at least as much as colleges and universities do. The ability of faculty in public (but not private) higher education to form unions and bargain collectively goes back to the growth of state statutes governing public sector collective bargaining; these began in the late 1960s. These changes all started well in advance of the time Generation Xers approached academia and so to attribute these changes to their characteristics alone seems inappropriate. In many respects, they are a result of the Baby Boomer Generation.

Second, as John Lombardi stressed, higher education is not a homogeneous set of institutions. We are very heterogeneous in terms of the academic

programs we offer, the selectivity spheres in which we compete, the degrees that we offer, and the resources that we have at our disposal. So the responses of institutions to Generation X are likely to vary widely across institutions.

In recent years there has been a dramatic widening in the distribution of resources across private higher education institutions; the rich have gotten richer, which mirrors what is going on in the economy as a whole. Financial problems faced by state governments have also resulted in a dramatic decline in the resources that public higher education institutions have available relative to their private sector counterparts, with the decline being the greatest for the non-flagship public institutions. As a result, faculty salaries have fallen in public higher education relative to private higher education and, within both sectors, average salaries have become more diverse across academic institutions. As such, the ability of academic institutions to adopt family-friendly policies is going to vary widely across institutions. Institutions that have no money to send faculty to professional meetings will not be able to provide funds for child care for faculty attending those meetings as Princeton did. Institutions that barely have enough funds to offer graduate student stipends that are half those at the richest private universities will not be able to offer maternity leave for graduate students as Princeton did.

Of course, it is worth emphasizing that family policies, which may have costs in the short run, also yield benefits to institutions and in the long run may actually reduce costs. Linda Bunnell's discussion of the policies UWSP has adopted made clear that a major driver of these policies is to enhance faculty retention, which often helps reduce costs. UWSP is not a wealthy institution but it understood that it needed to implement these policies for financial reasons. So while we should take John Lombardi's caution about academia's need to rein in costs very seriously, sometimes new programs that introduce additional costs can actually save institutions money.

Colleges and universities make decisions all the time about how to allocate their resources. Historically, they have not included many work-life benefits in the mix. Increasingly, corporations have come to see such benefits as essential to their ability to attract and retain the most talented and loyal workforce. Much of corporate America no longer sees these benefits as "add-ons" but rather has come to see them as essential characteristics of the working environment. Higher education institutions need to consider seriously whether they need to follow this lead if they want to attract the strongest undergraduate and graduate students to faculty careers. As Joan Girgus has stressed, instituting even one or two family-friendly policies or programs can make a substantial difference. Not only

will they provide help in specific situations, they will also send a strong signal about what an institution values.

NOTE

1. For more details on this and other policies that are part of the University of California's "Faculty Friendly Edge," see <http://ucfamilyedge.berkeley.edu>.