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Our Universities: Faculty and Resources

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Our Universities: Faculty and Resources

Fifth in a series on state funding for higher education

Chester Dunning, an acquaintance of mine, understands the value of faculty work in a free society. He is quoted in a WSJ piece, ***Putting a Price on Professors:***

Mr. Dunning says his scholarly work animates his teaching and inspires his students. "But if you want me to explain why a grocery clerk in Texas should pay taxes for me to write those books, I can't give you an answer," he says.

His eyes sweep his cramped office, lined with books. Then Mr. Dunning finds his answer. "We've only got 5,000 years of recorded human history," he says, "and I think we need every precious bit of it."

Nothing is more critical to quality in universities than who it hires as members of the faculty. No annual expense is higher than a university's investment in faculty salaries. No group chafes more at administrative direction than do faculty. No group is more inscrutable to those on the outside of the university looking in than faculty.

Graduates rarely cite the new football stadium, the well kept grounds, the clean hallways, the nicely typed memos, the well kept books, the efficient health service, the nice dorms, or even the good food in the dining halls as key parts of their educational experience. But they always recall at least one faculty member who had an impact on their thinking and insight. It's in the nature of the university experience.

At times, it can seem that faculty members are downright antagonistic to the needs of life outside of academia. But, to a large degree, that is their purpose. Faculty crusade for the central importance of learning and education to the mission of the university.

According to the *Digest of Educational Statistics-2008*, in 1976 22% of all university faculty were part time. By 2007, that number had climbed to 48%, and it is still climbing.

Leadership shortsightedness and unprecedented budgetary challenges have caused many universities to rely more heavily on non-tenure track, adjunct, or visiting faculty as a substitute for tenured or tenure-track faculty as a way to economize. The pressure of this cost argument, however, should be resisted for a number of reasons.

First, adjunct faculty are frequently overworked and underpaid, often bouncing between multiple institutions, just to make ends meet. This can lead to unfortunate consequences. Engagement, both in and out of the classroom, ultimately impacts both teaching and learning, and without a long-term, reciprocal commitment, there's little hope it will take root.

Second, while adjunct faculty may provide excellent teaching - research, scholarship, creative activity and service are critically important to the well-being of research universities. Teaching may be first among equals in this mix, but it is almost impossible to achieve excellence in any academic pursuit without participating to some extent in all of them. There are classes of institutions where original work is not considered overly important, but research universities do not fall among their number.

Third, adjunct faculty can be appealingly easier to get along with. Tenured faculty can be a prickly lot. Shared governance and a mild distrust of various forms of authority - which leadership must provide - creates healthy, often times spirited interaction between university administrators and faculty. Adjunct faculty tend to be more ready to align with the administration. They don't have tenure, and therefore must constantly tend to their relationship with the administration, rather than their responsibility to "capital-T" Truth. Without shared governance, universities can cease to meet their most fundamental duties. In collective bargaining situations, this can be frustrating. I have a few bumps and bruises from such interaction myself. But it is how we balance our responsibilities.

The Chronicle of Higher Education posts stories monthly on the growing gaps of adjunct and tenured faculty pay. While not the only cause, state funding is clearly a factor. Adjuncts are doing more work with less pay, fewer benefits, and frequently, if you include graduate students, generating more student credit hours: the emerging gold standard of productivity. But they do this without full citizenship in the community. Why invest of yourself when the university has no skin in the game.

Some university leaders, in the name of productivity and efficiency, are investigating dual paths to tenure. While rewarding good teachers is an important way to instill respect for the profession in the community, to suggest that some tenured faculty should only teach, or only conduct research, would be a serious mistake.

A friend of mine told me that, for a university, teaching and research are like exhaling and inhaling. Choosing to specialize in one or the other won't lead to a long, fruitful life.

While the cost to state and student might be higher, neglect of the idea of balance is higher still.