

Overview

by *Harold S. Wechsler*

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A former editor of NEA higher education publications, Wechsler has published books and articles on student access to higher education, the history of the disciplines, and education for business and for teaching.

Wechsler is currently writing a history of middle colleges—high schools for at-risk students located on community college campuses—and a history of efforts to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice on college campuses.

“Will America’s colleges and universities be able to deliver teaching and learning of acceptable quality over the next several decades?”

Howard R. Bowen and Jack Schuster asked this question a decade ago in *American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled*. Bowen and Schuster feared a decline in interest in the academic profession among able young people.

“The faculties are a major influence upon the destiny of the nation,” they noted, “and the nation has a clear and urgent interest in assembling and maintaining faculties having adequate numbers of talented, well-trained, highly motivated, and socially-responsible young people.”¹

But the next decade did not witness the groundswell of support for the increasingly difficult job that Bowen and Schuster called for; instead, polemics critical of the academic profession crowded out sober assessments.

These criticisms did little to make the academic profession more attractive to those students whom the nation will rely upon to instruct a predicted growing number of undergraduates. Nor are the actual working conditions of the professoriate anywhere near ideal. Faculty members turned back this year’s assault on tenure by the Regents of the University of Minnesota, but other attacks are promised. Students and parents will pay more for a faculty that includes a growing number of part-timers, graduate assistants, and contingent staff. A 27.2 percent growth in the proportion of part-time faculty members between 1991 and 1993 is hardly a recipe for curricular coherence or campus community.

The *NEA 1997 Almanac of Higher Education* offers a mixed picture of the working conditions of faculty and staff. The average full-time faculty member received \$49,237 in 1995-96, notes John B. Lee, in “Faculty Salaries, 1995-96,” a 3 percent increase over 1994-95, but less than last year’s 4.3 percent gain. Salaries barely kept pace with cost-of-living increases in 1995-96, and faculty purchasing power still has not rebounded to its 1972 high. Salary gaps increased between men and women, and between academic specialties in land-grant colleges.

This year’s special *Almanac* study, “The Relative Value of Teaching and Research,” by James S. Fairweather, revisits an issue he addressed in our inaugural volume. In 1992-93, as in 1987-88, Fairweather reports, the more

time spent on teaching, the less the pay. In contrast, spending more time on research, publishing, and teaching graduate students was more likely to result in higher salaries. Faculty pay, Fairweather concludes, “has not changed in line with the intense scrutiny paid to teaching and learning since the late 1980s.”

“Faculty Workload and Productivity: Ethnic and Gender Disparities,” Henry L. Allen’s discussion of the racial and ethnic composition of the academic workforce, shows continuing problems in recruiting professors from minority groups. Workload and productivity, Allen notes, differ more by institution and discipline than by ethnic status—everyone works long hours. But minority faculty members are disproportionately concentrated in community colleges. Recognizing that jeremiads about faculty have instilled mistrust in the public, Allen calls for careful studies of faculty productivity, based on robust theories of academic systems and their organizational components.

Today, less than 40 percent of the academic workforce is full-time tenure or tenure-track. The resultant contingent workforce, note Gary Rhoades and Rachel Hendrickson in “Reconfiguring the Professional Workforce,” includes large numbers of graduate assistants and part-timers who lack basic protections. Negotiators for faculty, Rhoades and Hendrickson argue, should bargain for increased procedural rights surrounding the use of part-time faculty. They provide examples of contract language to emulate and avoid.

State support for higher education in 1996, William Zumeta and John Fawcett-Long show in “State Fiscal and Policy Climate for Higher Education: 1996,” slightly outpaced the inflation rate, but few states are well-positioned to respond to the expected growth in demand for access to higher education. Tuition growth rates increased sharply in the early 1990s as revenue from state appropriations declined, but the rate of increase “slowed” to twice the inflation rate as the economy and state treasuries stabilized. A lag in financial aid, Zumeta and Fawcett-Long note, raises questions about enrollment capacity and access, especially for lower-income and minority students.

The proportion of faculty nearing the “traditional” retirement age, notes Jay Chronister in “Faculty Retirement and Benefits,” is increasing just as observers question the viability of state pension plans and Social Security. Two-thirds of state pension plans, he says, are underfunded and 40 percent are undercontributed. Incentive retirement programs for faculty, he adds, provide a short-term answer. About 36 percent of surveyed institutions offered these plans in 1994-95, including 55 percent of public and 68 percent of independent research universities. Retirement benefits for part-time faculty members, Chronister notes, are available at only 42 percent of institutions. Careful retirement planning by faculty members, he concludes, is mandatory when a retirement age isn’t.

Administrative salaries increased by 4.2 percent in 1995-96, slightly lower than the 4.4 percent increase in 1994-95, note David Montgomery and Gwendolyn Lewis, in “Administrative Staff: Salaries and Issues.” Salary scales for administrators and faculty showed growing gaps between senior and junior positions. Montgomery and Lewis also document declines in full-time staff positions, and concomitant increases in part-time positions.

Stagnant purchasing power, a growing salary gap between juniors and seniors, long workweeks, and shaky retirement vehicles—all suggest that American professors and staff remain a national resource imperiled. We hope this *NEA Almanac* helps alert the public to the true state of the profession.

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NOTES

¹ Bowen and Schuster, 3, 4.

REFERENCES

Howard R. Bowen and Jack H. Schuster, *American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).