TREADMILL TO OBLIVION?
THE COMING CONFLICT
OVER ACADEMIC WORKLOAD

by Jeff Lustig

Faculty across the nation have become concerned over the last decade about the changing nature of academic employment and the increase in assigned duties. Conflicts have been sparked by different issues at different places, but they can all be characterized by the shorthand term, “workload,” and ultimately emerge from a collision of assumptions about the proper purposes and character of higher education.2

The terms of those assumptions and nature of the issues raised by the accelerating academic treadmill have been thrown into sharp relief in the California State University (CSU), the largest public university system in the nation and one that in many ways epitomizes the problems bedeviling faculty at other colleges, comprehensive universities, and research universities throughout the United States. Faculty committed to preserving the professional nature of their calling and the quality of their students’ education may look to the situation in California as an illustrative case.

The 22,000 professors who teach on the 22 campuses of CSU have wrestled with workload issues for a decade. In a rare moment of concilia-

Jeff Lustig is professor of Government at CSU Sacramento. He is former statewide officer and local chapter president of the California Faculty Association, and former organizer of lecturers and part-timers in the U.C. system. He is a member of the Executive Committee, Collective Bargaining Council at AAUP and author of Corporate Liberalism, the Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890-1920.
tion back in 1991, the chancellor’s office agreed with the California Faculty Association (CFA), the union representing CSU’s full- and part-time faculty, that teaching loads were too heavy and signed a contract that would reduce the full-time teaching load from four courses to three per semester. However, the union agreed to waive this provision during the state budget crisis of 1992, and it was never enforced. By 1998-99 faculty had to fight for more than a year just to retain the pre-1991 protections, a galling situation given that faculty salaries lagged 11 percent behind those at comparable institutions.

The basis for agreement in 1991 was a “CSU Faculty Workload Study,” undertaken for the Chancellor’s Office and CFA that showed CSU professors were working more than faculty at 35 similar universities in 22 states. “CSU faculty teach more courses,” the report concluded, “have more students [88 per semester on average compared to 75 for others] meet more hours per week, teach more units, have a greater number of preparations, and have more new preparations than is the case for [other] USA faculty.” During subsequent negotiations in 1998-99, an informal poll of 20 comparison institutions nationally found that CSU professors taught roughly 25 percent more courses than the others, with a 4/4-course load for semester campuses compared to 3/3 and 3/2 loads elsewhere.

CSU faculty devoted 61 percent of their work hours to teaching, advising, and instruction-related paperwork compared to 54 percent at other institutions, and spent an average of 11 hours per week in class, compared to 9 for their counterparts, leaving CSU faculty less time than others for research, scholarship, and professional development.

Given that the Carnegie-unit rule of thumb regards one classroom contract-hour as requiring two additional hours of preparation—for course design, lecture preparation, advising, testing, writing supervision, grading, etc.—the 15-weighted teaching unit norm at CSU and other institutions might suggest a 45-hour work week. But already by 1990, the union/administration-sponsored study found that faculty in the CSU worked “nearly 50 hours [a week] for all institutionally related activities.”

The American public is generally in the dark about commitments of this magnitude. The American Association of University Professors noted in 1994 that the public labored under “misconceptions about how faculty spend their time, particularly outside the classroom…. [W]orkload is
frequently confused with teaching hours, and the sum of hours spent in formal classroom contact is taken as the faculty work week.”

Unfortunately, those with the responsibility to dispel such confusion are often the ones creating it. CSU’s Chancellor Charles Reed, speaking publicly at CSU San Luis Obispo in fall 1998, chose to curry favor with local influentials by opining that faculty only “work about seven or eight months a year. You know, from about 9 to 2, Monday through Thursday.”

The chancellor notwithstanding, workload in CSU as at other institutions nationally rose during the ‘90s. The system taught about 1,000 more students a year in 1998-99 than in 1990-91, with 1,400 fewer tenure-track faculty. Between 1994 and 1995 and 2001 and 2002, to give a different measure of this increase, the number of students rose 18 percent, while tenure-track faculty increased by less than 1 percent, the number of administrators increased 33 percent, and lecturers/part-timers grew by 66 percent.

From the 1990-91 to 1996-97 academic years, student to faculty ratios (SFRs) rose by roughly 11 percent—from 18.4:1 to 20.6:1, tapering off at 20:1 in 1998-99. The SFRs were larger for the lecturers and part-timers who now made up fully 50 percent of CSU’s instructional staff and who lacked protections against demands for outsized enrollments—an entire segment of the faculty living “on soft money and borrowed time,” as one put it ruefully. SFRs were larger in some departments and lower division courses. (In my college of Social Sciences, CSU Sacramento, lower division SFRs were 27.2:1 in 1983, rose to 40.3:1 by 1997, and dropped back to 39.2:1 in fall 1999, though the 1999 average for the whole institution was 20.5:1.)

A follow-up study in 2002 reported the number of hours devoted to total workload activity for tenured and tenure-track faculty in the CSU had risen to 50.23 per week. With the new two-tier job structure leaving a reduced pool of regular faculty to carry out student advising and committee and governance work, non-classroom duties multiplied.

Increased expectations of publications and grant generation for advancement, even though CSU is primarily a teaching institution, also added to the load, reflected in a four-hour per week jump in Scholarly/Creative Activities, as did preparation of redundant paper-
work for the new merit pay and outcomes assessment plans imposed by administrators.

The story is similar at comprehensive universities, research universities, and community colleges throughout the country. During the 1990s reduced state budgets created heavier workloads as faculty were forced to teach larger classes, retiring tenured faculty were replaced by part-timers, and managers imposed new burdens on faculty. In obedience to a complex law of organizations identified by Arthur Waskow, “Underwork [for example, increased use of part-timers] breeds overwork.”

We are in a speed-up. Most college and university teachers we know now work evenings and much of the weekend, exhausted by the academic treadmill, worrying about burnout and growing nostalgic for the old custom called the work week. Faculty are urged to take as many students as classrooms will hold. Lecturers are assigned more students than officially permitted. Theses advisors have to fight to receive credit for independent supervision. And though California experienced a brief economic recovery in the last years of the decade, the CSU Chancellor’s Office refused to authorize tenure-track hires to prepare for the expected “tidal wave” of students. Instead CSU continued to expand the contingent labor force and to hire new administrators and refused to consider course reductions. But the build-up of faculty teaching, research, and service loads is inimical to providing a good education.

If workload increases were triggered by economic downturn, why did
workload not drop with economic recovery? The answer is that CSU top managers, like higher education administrators across the land, were smitten with a new model of university operations. This was a business model that established “productivity” as a primary institutional measure, saw contributions to the economy as the university’s main justification, and proposed a restructuring of the university along corporate lines.

Administrators claimed, without proof, that adopting this business model would produce greater public and legislative support for the university. The embrace of the new model was immediately apparent in a new vocabulary as talk about revenue streams, “profit centers,” and “value-adding” processes seeped out of closed finance meetings. The shift to this business model promised to complete the Managerial Revolution, whose aim was to heighten supervision of faculty and produce the “managed professional,” as Gary Rhoades described the new faculty in a thought-provoking oxymoron.15

Implementation of this new model would fulfill a plan long sought by higher education foundations and consultants. The president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching penned an article already in 1905 asking, “Shall the University Become a Business Corporation?” and soon retained the services of Taylor-associate Morris L. Cooke to provide the answer. Cooke concluded that “academic efficiency” was no different from industrial efficiency, Clyde Barrow explains:

Organization was primarily an engineering problem. And administering this organization was the function of management… [O]rganization-al efficiency demanded that a worker not ‘produce any longer by his own initiative,’ but ‘execute punctiliously’ the orders given by management, ‘down to their minutest details...’16

A shift toward this view was apparent with Reed’s predecessor, the former corporate raider, Barry Munitz.

In an article significantly titled “Transformation in an Age of Social Triage,” Munitz addressed his goals for students in a section headed, “Influence over Product,” subordinated talk about pedagogy to the need for “technology transfer,” and set out in administrative fashion to man-
age rather than persuade university faculty. “What leverage and constraint mechanisms will be required to effect change and improve client orientation in response to consumer and patron expectations?”

As an indication that implementation of the model has begun, Christopher Newfield explains that a “private-sector model of financial control…[has] become the authorized language in which the university expresses its purposes.”

“Budgeting becomes the fundamental governing principle of the university as a whole. It sits at the head of the table. Others may sit there too—faculty interests, student interests, staff interests. But finance controls the discussion.”

The potentials for generation of revenue, acquisition of grants, and commodifying teaching and learning outweigh the wisdom of a particular curricular design or the quality of classroom experience in making resource allocations.

This plan for transformation of the American university has direct consequences for faculty’s professional work, as suggested by Cooke’s concern for “punctilious execution” of orders. Faculty organizations sometimes fail to see this, looking at workload agreements simply as one benefit among others. But it’s all part of a larger picture. And this picture spells trouble for faculty in at least three ways.

First, the obvious way for an organization to increase productivity is to increase output per unit input. For universities recast as the Education Industry, this means getting more students to graduate more quickly for the same faculty dollar, creating a diploma mill. Even better is cheaper labor, attained by hiring into less expensive job categories. That the process elides the critical question of what should be produced and the possibility that real productivity in higher learning requires inefficiency is beside the point. For those with their eyes on the bottom line, this is how you run the plant.

Second, avatars of lean production want “flexibility” above all else, and the way to get flexibility is to transfer as many expenses as possible from the fixed to the variable side of the ledger. The goal of increasing liquidity not only entails dispensing with “bricks and mortar” but also gives rise to plans to “liquefy faculty”—a plan with uncomfortable resonances of the Soviets’ method for dealing with dissidents. This is where contingent workers come in—and proposals to replace tenure with short-term
contracts, as Reed did at Florida Gulf Coast University when he was chancellor of the Florida State University system.

All of this diminishes the scope of academic freedom and converts faculty from citizens and co-governors into simple factors of production. It “move[s] the faculty from the center to the periphery. [Faculty] is no longer to have a unique role in shaping institutional destiny.”22

Third, and equally critical, the new model threatens to transform the kind of work being done in the academy. It envisions work that can be routinized, work that can be learned quickly by temps, and, instead of being collectively self-managed, work that can be administratively controlled. All the recent innovations—the two-tier job structure, junking of salary schedules, performance pay, outsourcing, distance learning, outcomes assessment—share as a leitmotif this shifting of power from faculty to managers. These programs reveal the hidden politics of administrative rationalization, the politics entailed in the efforts to expropriate the role of judgment and to eliminate autonomy of craftspeople and professionals.

This is what the recent talk about “changing faculty culture” is about. If proponents of the business model are successful, the faculty will lose decision-making authority over curriculum and pedagogy, as well as over their workday. Faculty work will be degraded as it is “unbundled” into pieces, following the logic of Taylor’s scientific management,23 susceptible to reorganization and commodification by managers who don’t necessarily understand it. Teaching itself will be disintegrated into different components, as it is now at places like the University of Phoenix, with much of it outsourced to waiting vendors. Academic work will lose its richness and its rewards, its qualities as a craft and calling. Good work will become bad work.

The workload issue is thus more than a matter of load limits. It is a question of what sort of work will be loaded, and who is responsible for overseeing and appraising its execution. And implicit in this, in turn, is the fundamental conflict over what a university itself is. If the university is simply a complex tool for training, “reskilling,” and “upskilling” a labor force fated to be continually recycled,24 then the deskilling of faculty is appropriate.
If, on the other hand, colleges and universities are means to develop the intellectual abilities of people, to help them “find their own best powers,” to prepare citizens for democratic participation, to “raise the intellectual tone of society, … and cultivate the public mind,” then the nation’s faculty need to reject efforts to expropriate the functions of their collective judgment, refuse subordination to deans, and retain their power to determine what counts as work. And they need to articulate their alternative vision of the institution to the public.

The fight faculty are engaged in is similar to that being undertaken by other contemporary professionals, like nurses and HMO doctors. It is a struggle that workers in most sectors of American industry waged early in the 20th century, unfortunately without success. David Montgomery and others have chronicled how craftsmen who had collectively set their work standards, pace, and hours, and whose judgment and “initiative was indispensable to the operation of the enterprise,” saw their job control broken by the imperatives of capitalist organization, their crafts deskilled, and their jobs fragmented into segments susceptible to regimentation by supervisors who then recast the workers in the role of replaceable employees.

“The boss’s brain is under the worker’s cap,” Big Bill Haywood once said, and this certainly holds for the university. But what we increasingly see under our bosses’ caps is a salesperson’s brain, a marketer’s brain, producing a schizophrenia that agitates the campus and disturbs the sleep of all involved. The new educational administrators, fresh from crash courses in lean production and corporate newspeak, regard classroom materials as better produced by courseware salespersons, grading better subcontracted to part-timers, and advising best shunted over to the Advisement Center.

But a Brave New University peopled by well-paid administrators and impoverished lecturers, with an occasional tenured star to wander the quad, can hardly do justice to the higher educational experience for thousands of new students soon expected on our campuses. Faculty need to preserve the coherence of their jobs and the integrity of their different tasks as professionals. We need to insist on tenured appointments as full members of the academic community. And we need to engage our students as teachers, critics, and reflective scholars to prepare them for intel-
lectual independence and democratic citizenship as well as for the labor market. The root question in the clash of the conflicting university models is ultimately, “whose understanding of the job will govern the workplace?”

Workers who have protected their authority over their jobs and their professional autonomy as craftspeople have erected collective institutions for this purpose. The faculty senate and union contract fulfill this function in higher education. Writing of the 1930s, Gary Gerstle describes the ways New England textile workers briefly exercised “control of the duration, distribution, and intensity of work” and designed their own system for assigning jobs.

If the sign of the textile workers’ success was that “The union took over and did the job of the foreman,” then that of the faculty’s success will be keeping administrators from becoming foremen and usurping the right of faculty to define their jobs and standards. This will require reaffirming a vocabulary and criteria appropriate to a college and university.

Recently, in an innovative series of public hearings with faculty, students, members of the community, and legislators, the California Faculty Association created a forum where complaints about the corporatization of the university could be aired and an alternative vision of higher education elicited from the participants. CFA developed this alternate vision into a program aimed at educational quality and expressive of the broader public’s hopes and expectations. Aronowitz writes that faculty need to “become agents of a new educational imagination.” With its “Future of the University” project, CFA was exactly that.

CFA presented workload proposals as part of this larger program in the protracted contract struggle of 2001-02. For now, the present state budget crisis has short-circuited adequate consideration of CFA’s workload proposals. But the union did make some headway by identifying student-faculty ratios as the best measure of teaching load and calling for not only a reduced course load but also a lower SFR. This left many workload issues unaddressed, but it was a beginning. More broadly, the union succeeded in putting workload on the agenda. And its success in publicly faulting the system’s failure to hire tenure-track faculty and diversion of funds away from instructional purposes pressured the chancellor into agreeing, by side letter, to 1,600 tenure-track hires in 2002-03. Such hir-
ing would be a significant step toward reducing workload for current faculty.

But this will be a long struggle for CFA and other faculty organizations nationally. The interests and ideology behind the corporatization of the university have been gaining influence for too long to be turned back in a season by good arguments or a single contract. Other workers who have tackled these issues have had to grapple with them year-in and year-out, through formal channels and in direct actions, by winning new contracts and then fighting over the meaning of the contract’s terms and provisions.

And higher education faculty will have to shift the public focus from superficial measures of “output”—like outcomes assessments—back to inputs and restore legislative funding, especially for tenure-track hires. A public who for a century understood the importance of higher education now, after a half-century’s misdirection, has to be reminded of the importance of investing in its own future.

Faculty unions have an essential role to play in all this. Faculty senates and ad hoc commissions can make critical contributions, but by themselves they lack the legal clout to protect academic freedom and even the framework for their own activities. Their powers remain advisory. Nor do they have influence over the budget process. Union contracts, by contrast, have the force of law, and union efforts through political action can affect budgeting and force the university to open its books. But if faculty unions are to fulfill their potential, they need to part ways with some aspects of the older “services” or business unionism. Three partings in particular are necessary.

First, where services unions often pursued their members’ concerns as special interests, faculty unions need to insist on their right to speak for the university as an institution and for the public interest in higher education. This means among other things that they have to engage the public directly rather than depending on college presidents or state legislators to do it. Faculty workload standards are not a guild privilege. They are the necessary conditions for educating taxpayers and their children.

Second, where mid-century American unions generally gave up efforts to help direct the larger enterprise and control the character of work in return for assurances of bread-and-butter protections, faculty unions as
professional unions, must preserve their members’ roles as co-governors and directors of the university. Where all unions try to secure higher wages for their members, faculty unions must attempt to keep the rewards of their profession from being reduced to only a wage.

And third, where services unions often seem to their members like third parties or external providers of grievance insurance, and benefits, academic unions need to be recognized by members and staff as direct expressions of a mobilized faculty. Faculty unions need to be organizations of people committed individually and collectively to acting on the basis of what work in a liberal university should be. This, ultimately, calls for a redefinition of faculty professional identity. But that’s a topic for another time.

ENDNOTES

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Southwest Labor Studies Conference, Long Beach, California, May 5, 2000. Treadmill to Oblivion was the title of Fred Allen’s autobiography.


3 The Memorandum of Understanding Between the CFA and the Board of Trustees of CSU, Unit 3, July 1, 1991-June 30, 1993, provided that the load be reduced from 15 weighted teaching units (WTUs), consisting of 12 WTUs of classroom contact hours/semester plus 3 units for collateral duties, to 11 (plus 3) for 1992-93, and eventually to 9 WTU (plus 3) by 1995. Article 20. Since 1995, CSU/CFA contracts have not used the 15 WTU figure, relying on an older document and a sideletter that controls workload by "past practices."

4 CPEC, the California Postsecondary Education Commission, identifies 20 comparable comprehensive liberal universities to which it compares CSU on matters like salary. In January 2001, the lag was 8.9 percent, but by mid-2002 had risen again to 10.6 percent.


7 “Workload Study,” p. 65. The exact figures were 47.9 hours/week for CSU faculty and 47.1 hours/week elsewhere. P. 4. In 1993, Professor Terry Kandal, CSU-Los Angeles wrote that “Virtually all existing studies find a faculty workload of over 50 hours per week…” “Teaching Sociology in the CSU: Attractions, Constraints and Values,” California Sociologist, Winter/Summer, 1993, 4; and see 21.


9 Data from CPEC California Postsecondary Education Commission, the CSU Chancellors Office webpage, and system information, compiled by CFA Research Director, Government Relations Office, Andrew Lyons, fall, 2001.

10 Environmental theorist Michael Black, SFSU. Full-time lecturers rose as a percentage of CSU’s full-time instructional staff from 6.6 percent in 1993 to 12 percent by 2002. This figure and that on loss of tenure-track faculty provided by Professor George Diehr, Management Science, CSU San Marcos, from CSU Chancellor’s Office and IPEDS data. Personal memo, Aug. 17, 2000. Student/faculty ratios given by “CSU enrollment 86-98.xls” data, Diehr memo Aug. 15, 2000, and "Data for Selected Disciplines: 1989-1995; Summary—All CSU Campuses,” CSU-LA Analytical Studies.

11 CSU Sacramento data, “Student/Faculty Ratios by College and Level,” fall 1994-fall 1999, and “Student/Faculty Ratios…Over Eighteen Year Period,” presented to CSUS Committee on University Planning.

12 The off-setting decline was in hours spent on advising and, the report claims, committee work, though it notes that the number of office hours increased and of committees on which individuals serve increased. The interpretive analysis for the 2002 data has not been published at the time of this writing. “CSU Faculty Workload Report: Selected Tables for Presentation to the CFA,” Apr. 28, 2002. Richard Serpe, Michael Lange, et al., Social and Behavioral Research Institute, CSU San Marcos. The 2002 study reports that mean hours in all workload activities for full-time lecturers, who make up 12 percent of total full-timers in CSU, had risen from 24.3 in 1990 to 30.3 in 2001. Their student contact hours had risen from 7.8 to 8.2 hours (1, 8, 9-10, 12).

13 For example, “Corporations that seek to keep workers part-time and temporary so as to pay them less and avoid providing medical or pension benefits, drive workers into finding extra jobs, just to keep hanging on by their fingertips to a barely adequate income.” Arthur Waskow “Free Time for a Free People,” The Nation, Jan. 1, 2001, 22.

14 The student/administrator ratio declined from 48.7 in 1991 to 41.1 in 1997. The average campus president’s salary increased by 33.6 percent in three years, to the $210k range. CSU payroll data, and student/administrator ratios from Diehr, “Table 2,” Oct. 7, 2000, CFA Board meeting.

15 See Clark Kerr, The Uses of the University, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963. 28. Rhoades, see no. 2 above.


17 Barry Munitz, “Managing Transformation in an Age of Social Triage,” in Sandra L. Johnson and Sean C. Rush eds., Reinventing the University, New York: Wiley, 1995. Munitz had been vice president under Charles Hurwitz of Maxxam, Inc. during its unfriendly buy-out of Pacific Lumber Company among other exploits. Many years previous to this he had been protégé to Clark Kerr.


19 “If costs yield nonquantifiable goods of the kind common in research and education, it will be hard for finance to certify them as valuable investments.” Newfield, p. 45.
20 "The intellectual mission of the academic system now exists as an ornament…for a host of more prosaic functions." Aronowitz, p. 62. The shift of priorities is reflected in employment. Gary Rhoades reports that faculty dropped from 64 percent of universities' professional workforce in 1977 to 55 percent only 12 years later, or from 34 percent to 32 percent of all academic employees. p. 89.

21 "…[P]erhaps teaching often needs to be inefficient…. [I]t is at those moments when the information flow slows to a trickle and even comes to a stop that teaching begins to take place. Learning starts when the essay by Montaigne or the passage by Rabelais ceases to be information and takes root in the student's mind." M. Randall, "A Guide to Good Teaching: Be Slow and Inefficient," Chronicle of Higher Education, Dec. 8, 2000. p. B24.


25 Latter phrases from John Henry Cardinal Newman, The Idea of a University, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1927, p. 177. The role college should play in helping students find their best powers was stressed by Paul Goodman, Compulsory Mis-education and Community of Scholars, New York: Vintage Books, 1964, 140. That democratic citizenship required higher education was an accepted tenet of civic republicanism from Jefferson through the 19th century.


27 The adoption of performance measures for workload and productivity augments managerial control because it substitutes narrow measurable criteria for broader standards of quality and, used as a basis for future resource allocation, scraps established safeguards and schedules. Whatever the limits of the latter, they were at least dependable, linked to the mission of the institution and expressive of a degree of faculty input. See Henry Lee Allen, "Workload and Productivity in an Era of Performance Measures," NEA 1999 Almanac of Higher Education.

28 David Wellman, The Union Makes us Strong, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Studying conflicts over work rules and job practices among West Coast (ILWU) longshoremen, Wellman finds that conflict was constant because "the very definition of longshore work is at stake…. It is an argument about whose understanding of the job will govern the workplace….about who has the power to define work…." 268-276, 209-210.


30 Gerstle, 140-141, 145-146. “The control the union was able to exercise over the distribution of work was what attracted [people who hadn't been involved] to the union. Such control, more than wage increases, constituted the most intensely felt achievement of ITU [Independent Textile Union] members during the 1930s.” Wellman makes the same point about the ILWU hiring hall.

31 Aronowitz, 101. He adds that academic unions are “challenged to accept responsibility for the academic system rather than remaining representatives of specific interests of faculty and staff within the university's technocratic boundaries.”
WORKS CITED


