

On the Brink: Assessing the Status of the American Faculty

by Jack H. Schuster & Martin J. Finkelstein

Whither the professoriate? As the academy spins into the new century, it enters also a new era, one in which the future of the American faculty is as unclear as at any time in the past. As we document in our recently published study, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*, substantial transformation of the American academic profession has occurred in recent decades, since the brief interlude of “unrest” subsided circa 1970.¹ In the book’s chapters, we interpret our empirically based findings and speculate about what lies ahead for the (thus far) indomitable, if somewhat rattled, academic profession.

Invited to submit our further reflections for this special issue of *Thought & Action*, we will outline several themes for this essay that we believe encapsulate our findings (mindful that a summary of the book’s nearly 600 pages of text, tables, and figures can hardly be condensed into these few pages). We also identify several areas that urgently need further probing in order to shed light on crucial unknowns, and we advocate some ways that *Thought & Action*’s readership can contribute to ensuring a productive future for the academy and its core asset, the instructional staff.

We begin with the historically based proposition that provides an unsettling current context: In the near-millennium history of the academic profession, there has never been a time in which change is occurring so rapidly. That is a bold assertion. After all, every aspect of higher education has been thoroughly transformed over time. But a fair reading of the *rate* of change through the centuries makes clear that

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those changes in the tradition-bound, organizationally conservative university have been gradual—very gradual.² In recent years, however, the pace of change throughout postsecondary education has accelerated sharply. The modern research university bears only faint resemblance to its early 20th century predecessor. The community college is massively different from its pre-World War II forbearers when two-year institutions, née junior colleges, were primarily dedicated to prepping the marginally prepared for transfer to baccalaureate programs. The higher education sector, so thoroughly dominated by white males, gradually acceded to accommodating difference. Thus, for example, the proportion of women faculty rose since 1970 from

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about 25 to 35 percent. In all, the change in faculty demographics in the span of a few decades has been remarkable, if insufficient.³

Viewed in historical perspective, landmark events have had profound effects over time in reshaping the American academy, but the changes on the ground were ever so incremental. To cite a few obvious examples, the Dartmouth College case, decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1819, served to buffer the “private” institutions of higher education from the grasp of the several states, but implementation came about slowly. The impact of the hugely important 1862 Morrill “Land Grant” Act was likewise slow to evolve. The President’s Commission on Higher Education of 1947 promulgated visionary recommendations that anticipated progress along many fronts, but the Commission’s bold agenda for democratizing access to higher education was not acted on for years. The Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Education Act of 1972 each expanded a national commitment to improved access—which, again, developed incrementally. Perhaps the most dramatic exception to prevailing gradualism was the abrupt change created by the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the “G.I. Bill”), but even that legislation’s seismic impact soon subsided as the large cohort of veterans made their way through colleges and universities.

So, there have been events—statutes, court decisions, institutional actions—that ultimately have rerouted higher education, but the principal thesis holds: Until recently, systemic change has come about quite gradually (the G.I. Bill being a conspicuous exception), and few actions have had large-scale immediate effects on the system or on the composition of the faculty or what they do on the job. But in this new era, the shock waves seem to follow one another in rapid succession. As a consequence, the proximate future is riddled with uncertainties, unknowns arguably hazardous to the viability of the academic profession.

Comparable uncertainties undoubtedly can be said to characterize the future of other professions; the medical profession comes readily to mind. Indeed, profound change is transforming society and all its sectors in innumerable ways. So, the academy and its faculty is hardly unique in the extent to which professional prerogative is being challenged anew. Even so, the present is exceedingly volatile, obscuring even the proximate future. And so our point of departure is that higher education is caught up in sweeping change that so blurs the near-term future—say the next decade or two—that we fear for the preservation of core values of the traditional academic profession.

Lest we be misunderstood, we do not contend that higher education and its

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faculty should be spared intense scrutiny; indeed, substantial reforms are needed. The higher learning establishment has never wanted for sharp-tongued critics, from Thorstein Veblen's diatribe against college presidents whom he derided as "captains of erudition" to the current Commission on the Future of Higher Education (the Spellings Commission) with its broadside salvos.⁴ Whether or not the Commission's stinging critique will be acted on politically, it is clear that societal forces are reshaping higher education and its faculty both in constructive and exciting—and dangerous—ways.

Our analysis of the professoriate depicts a complex enterprise—the sprawling domain of American higher education—and an academic profession in rapid transformation. Our findings suggest not only an unprecedented rate of change but evidence of a restructured sector that is already a reality—and with much more change likely to contribute to further restructuring in the proximate future. The gist is this: Three fundamental elements of restructuring are well underway, and these interrelated trends are central to how academic life is being reconfigured in the U.S. They constitute, in other words, the principal axes of the ongoing transformation of the American faculty.

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

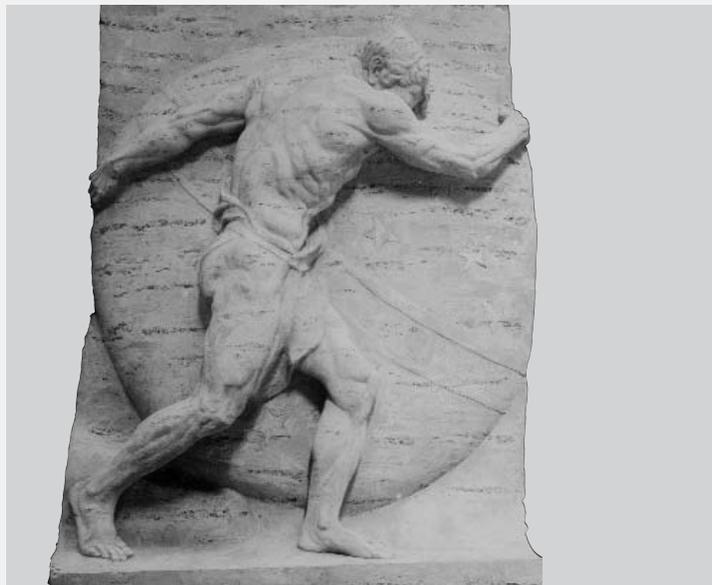
First and foremost among these developments is the tidal change in academic staffing patterns that is moving, seemingly inexorably, toward creating a predominantly contingent workforce. More specifically, nearly two in five of all full-time instructional staff now hold term-limited appointments subject to renewal. While 2005 figures are not yet available, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Fall Staff Survey for 2003 shows that among about 630,000 *full-time* faculty, some 34.8 percent, or approximately 219,000, are

appointed off the tenure track on term contracts. In addition, there are some 128,000 full-time tenure-track (but yet untenured faculty) *probationary* faculty; they may come to obtain a secure appointment (via tenure), but, for now, their appointment contracts are subject to not being extended. As of 2003, a whopping 55.1 percent of full-time faculty hold time-limited appointments: the 20.3 percent of faculty who are probationary on-track (tenurable) faculty plus the contingent full-time but off-track faculty (34.8 percent).

Here is the most astonishing (we think disturbing) datum: from 1993 to the present, the proportion of all newly hired full-time faculty appointed *off* the tenure track increased *each* year from slightly more than 50 percent to very nearly three in five (58.6 percent) in 2003 (the year of the most recent data).⁵ Every indication suggests that the number and proportion of contingent (non-probationary) full-time appointees has continued to expand, and thus it is likely that their proportion of all *full-time* faculty will cumulatively exceed one half in the foreseeable future.

In other words, contingent or term appointments became during the past decade the *modal* form of new *full-time* faculty appointments. Still another dimension of contingency is the greatly expanding number of part-time appointments: roughly 543,000 part-time faculty (leaving aside the challenges of accurately counting part-timers and the inevitability of multiple counting of persons who teach at more than one postsecondary institution). Thus, while the relentless rise of part-time appointments over the past three decades to constitute (by head-count) nearly half the academic workforce may be “old news,” when considered alongside the dramatic redistribution of full-time appointments, it is clear that the academic profession has endured a massive makeover.

These rapidly evolving staffing arrangements do show marked differences within



the system. As to institutional type, research and doctoral universities and the more selective liberal arts colleges, while increasingly resorting to contingent staffing, nonetheless retain a substantial majority cadre of traditional full-time, tenured or tenure-track appointments. Among other four-year institutions and the two-year sector—together constituting the vast majority of American higher education—contingent full-time and part-time staffing are now the chief modes of institutional operation. In these venues, the result is a shrinking core of permanent instructional staff augmented by a host of part-time and full-time term appointments.⁶

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Variations in this trend's penetration are manifest also by academic field. Several fields in the humanities—most notably English and foreign languages—and other fields, including mathematics and business, are on their way to becoming collections of potential transients, even at the research universities. Beyond the differential impact by institutional type and field, a third variable, gender, plays an important role. The profusion of women into most precincts of postsecondary teaching that we have documented elsewhere is substantially accounted for by these term-limited appointments. That is simply a descriptive fact and offers no judgment about the extent to which these developments depict, as some contend, an exploitation of women who may be less geographically mobile than men, or, at least to some extent, a positive accommodation to some women's apparent preference for more flexible and "balanced" careers and lives that may be better served by avoiding publication-for-tenure pressures in order to focus on teaching.

In all, the distribution of academic appointments is in rapid flux and seems destined to skew still further—and significantly—toward off-track appointments in the proximate future. An ever more truncated professoriate, by function and status, is a distinct and unsettling possibility.

ACADEMIC WORK

The second dimension of restructuring is the nature and distribution of academic work. Beyond the duration—the temporal-legal dimension—of academic employment appointments/contracts, the substance of the work itself shows significant shifts. Our data establish that while research requirements have spread throughout the four-year sector, the research function for the most part has been limited to the work of the "regular," full-time core faculty and has largely been squeezed out of the workload of those holding contingent appointments. (There

are exceptions, including mainly faculty who hold “research-only” appointments, often supported by soft money, as well as postdoctoral appointments primarily in the natural and health sciences.) This means that contingent appointees in the four-year sector are *predominately* teaching faculty.

That role encapsulation is reinforced by a related trend: the decline in the proportion of time that most faculty, but especially the contingent faculty, spend on administration and governance. That is, institutional administration and participation in governance are shrinking spheres of faculty work, responsibility, and

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involvement (*perhaps* because of the increase in the number of administrative staff to do administrative work). Accordingly, the familiar triumvirate of teaching, research, and service has largely morphed for the contingent faculty into a single-function role—teaching or research (for those less numerous research-only faculty appointments and post-docs).

In sum, the mix of tasks expected of academics is shifting and becoming more specialized, amounting in some ways to a reversion to earlier colonial times when a leading professor was augmented by an array of temporary tutors. This shrinking proportion of faculty having a traditional variety of responsibilities has profound implications for the future of academic work.

ACADEMIC CAREERS

A third sphere of restructuring is the academic career itself. There are several striking highlights. Among them are that academic careers in several fields, including English and education, are becoming women’s careers. Indeed, as discussed in our book (Chapter 3), the *majority of recent* full-time appointees throughout the humanities have been women. Also, entry-level compensation (as a percentage of median family income) for academic appointees is declining vis-à-vis other professions (Chapter 8). Further, new entrants begin their academic careers later than ever, and, in many cases, as a “second” career or a secondary branch of a primary career in fields such as nursing, accounting, and so on.

In some fields (sciences and others), preparation (eligibility) for a regular faculty appointment assumes one or more tours as a postdoctoral fellow. This often arduous transitional phase is hardly a new development, but its unavailability as a prerequisite at research-oriented institutions for tenure track appointments throughout much of the natural sciences further delays the launching of faculty careers.

Perhaps most consequential for academic career trajectories, though, is the ongoing transformation of the profession into a majority of contingent employees, as described above. It is too soon to foretell precisely whether the careers of this ever-growing army of full-time, off-track faculty will be more similar to, or dissimilar from, their traditionally appointed counterparts, in terms of persistence and job satisfaction; adequate data simply do not yet exist.

Preliminary evidence from the U.S. Department of Education's 1999 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty suggests that career trajectories are diversifying in predictable patterns. Among current part-time faculty in 1998, the vast majority

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reported only previous part-time work experience; and among current full-time faculty in 1998, previous experience is primarily full-time. Indeed, among those who held full-time appointments in 1998, eight of ten had always worked exclusively on a full-time basis.

When we compared the work experience of full-timers on fixed-term contract with those who were tenure-track or tenured, a similar, if less pronounced, pattern emerged. Current tenure track or tenured faculty usually start out that way—about three-fifths reported only previous tenure-track/tenured experience. At the same time, about two-thirds of current fixed-contract faculty typically pursued their careers entirely in fixed-contract positions. While there is some permeability between fixed-contract and regular tenureable full-time appointments (about one quarter move from fixed-term to tenure-track), the two appear to be differentiating for the majority of faculty into separate career tracks.⁷

Thus the possibility, even the probability, that the relationship between faculty members and their employing institution will have become more tenuous—a weakening of loyalties from one to the other—surely has important implications for what an academic career means.

HIGHER EDUCATION'S INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM

The ongoing, interrelated restructuring of academic appointments, work, and careers is fueled by economic and technological megaforges that are accelerating the transformation of higher education and, accordingly, its faculty. "New providers" of higher education, organized not on the basis of traditional teaching-learning models but rather on business models, have begun to make a meaningful difference within the enterprise. The consumer orientation and convenience that characterize

much of the movement appear to have considerable and growing influence. The emergence of alternative “players” such as Florida Gulf Coast University, New Jersey’s Thomas Edison State College, the University of Massachusetts Online, Maine Open University, and Michigan Virtual University further diversifies the nature of academic work. And then there are the proprietaries, that is, the for-profit institutions, such as (to employ their stock market trading symbols as apt iconography for the new era) APOL and COCO.⁸ Other competitors for market share include for-profit but privately owned institutions.⁹

Integral to the influences that are being exerted on traditional academic practice by these focused providers is the pervasive impact of the instructional technology revolution, for “IT” has facilitated the entry of the host of new, non-traditional providers. The unrelenting waves of technological change continue to remold academic practice, spanning pedagogy, scholarship, and all aspects of administering and managing colleges and universities. Whether ageless staples such as classroom instruction (face-to-face or “F2F”) and residential colleges will long endure as higher education’s principal *modus operandi* is hardly a certainty.¹⁰ For-profit non-traditional academic programs are pressuring the market price of academic programs with which traditional institutions will need to find ways to compete.¹¹ The traditional higher education system will evolve to respond to the threats and opportunities posed by newer entrants, but changes in the system and in who the faculty are and what they do undoubtedly will be widespread.

The multiple effects of the ongoing transformation permeate all dimensions of the academy, and the results reflect a complicated mix of benefits and costs, both short-term and, we foresee, long-term—both for the academic profession itself, and, more generally, for our institutions, our students, and the larger society. Our best effort to capture these complex effects is depicted in Table 1.¹²

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our findings document the extant restructuring of academic staffing along the lines of appointments, work roles and activities, and career trajectories—as well as, ultimately, the institutional system itself. Many questions arise that illustrate the depth and breadth of the unknowns. What does this mean for the future of academic life and, perforce, for the American academy? What does such restructuring of academic life portend for the attractiveness of academic careers, both to draw talented persons into careers and to retain them? How temporary or durable will such careers be? How will such restructuring play out in the decades ahead—a time of inevitable turbulence in American and indeed global higher education? Will this restructuring abate? Accelerate? Will it affect all segments of the system more or less equally, or will there be havens shielded, but not unaffected, by these powerful, unrelenting forces? What quality assurance issues will be (are being) raised by these realities? How will they be affected by public policy that seeks to promote affordability and academic quality? What will become of the vitality of the nation’s university-based research enterprise?

Table 1
A Summary of the Consequences (Benefits and Costs) of Academic Restructuring

CONSTITUENCY	SHORT-TERM BENEFITS AND COSTS	LONG-TERM BENEFITS AND COSTS
Institutions of Higher Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial flexibility (better ensures responsiveness to student and other interests) • Increased ability to redeploy instructional staff • Increased competitiveness (esp. vis-à-vis non-traditional providers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement of academic disciplines by “client services” as “organizing” principle for instructional delivery • Corporatization (includes faculty as managed professionals and less emphasis on academic values for high-level administrators)
Campus Faculties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater social/status stratification of staff (core vs. periphery) • Increased workload for smaller core faculty • Declining influence of faculty as internal constituent • More efficient staffing (i.e., functionally more specialized) • Fewer “all positions” faculty (teaching/research/campus service) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renegotiation of faculty-institutional “social contract” (e.g., declining mutual loyalty; increased administrative oversight of academic affairs) • Diminished faculty ownership and control of intellectual property • Increasingly flexible accreditation standards, which serve to accommodate flexible portions of academic staffing (e.g., less emphasis on full-time faculty)
Students and Undergraduate Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly student-centered vs. faculty-centered focus (focus on clients not providers) • More cost-efficient instruction (cost/credit hour), which moderates cost increases to students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market-set standards for academic programs (standards no longer set by the academic professions) • Replacement of provider expertise by “client” needs as desideratum for organizing instruction • Greater responsiveness to needs of demographically diverse student body
Academic Profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited opportunity for traditional academic careers • Stratification of fields by level of market demand (e.g., business over physics) • Further undermining of “one faculty” ideal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic depressed job market in the traditional arts and sciences • Increased difficulty recruiting and retaining the “best and brightest” • “Withering” of select low-demand fields (physics, philosophy, literature) • Diminished protection of academic freedom as fewer positions are protected by tenure • Promotion of an academic star system undergirded by a vast new “academic proletariat”
National Research and Development Enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More efficient “research” expenditures; less encouragement/support for “esoteric” research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research function increasingly separated from teaching function (drift toward national academy model) • Research “corporatized” (corporate support; subject to increased reliance on corporate needs)

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CONSTITUENCY	SHORT-TERM BENEFITS AND COSTS	LONG-TERM BENEFITS AND COSTS
The Larger Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater market responsiveness of research activities • Increased efficiency in achieving definable outcomes • Increased responsiveness to societal needs as defined by market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased capacity to manage costs of higher education • Increased access to higher education (via increased efficiency and greater diversity of institutions and greater use of distance learning modes) • Increased polarization of higher education into elite, traditional, and residential venues and “streamlined,” accessible market-responsive venues • Diminished number of higher education institutions primed to carry out cutting-edge research and social critique • Unknown costs to society of higher education’s diminished ability to attract/retain top talent as faculty

While agencies and researchers scurry to keep tabs on the types of changes afoot, we believe that faculty members, too, campus by campus, would do well to monitor closely the changing distribution of types of appointments. The national data are revealing (but invariably dated because of the considerable time lag to publication), making more important the collection of campus-bounded data. Such campus-based efforts will better sensitize the academic community to the pace and extent of local change and highlight whether the result is consonant with institutional mission and basic academic values.

Beyond keeping an accurate “scorecard,” more ambitious inquiries about the effects of restructuring are needed on a much larger scale. Studies that establish rates of turnover by types of appointment, that measure levels of job satisfaction, and that attempt to get at the elusive “quality” of those persons who enter academic careers are among the many consequential, but largely unexplored, topics that require systematic attention if higher education (and its patrons and critics) are to acquire a satisfactory understanding of what the makeover of the academic profession means.

To sum up, we began these observations with the query: “Whither the Professoriate?” Our decade-long quest to answer that question entailed a close examination of several decades of descriptive data to discern trends and, peering ahead, to assess the likely effects of large-scale societal change—mainly economic, political, and technological—on higher education and the academic profession. We have been struck by the increasing rapidity of changes that buffet higher education and have led to a deep restructuring of academic appointments, work, and careers—a process that appears not to have lost any momentum.

At the same time, we are well aware that the academic profession has endured—for nearly a millennium now—even as the world has changed so profoundly. Yes, this remarkable record of resilience has sometimes involved accommodations (an extreme example is Nazi Germany) that corrupted basic principles of academic life. But persistence of the profession has been the rule, through proverbial thick and thin.

The huge question now looming is whether the forces that have triggered academic restructuring will, in time, so transform the academic profession that its role—its distinctive contribution—is becoming ever more vulnerable to dangerous compromise. Are we perhaps at the leading edge of such an alarming transformation? We do not purport to know the answer. We can say that our analysis leads to the conclusion that restructuring is not by itself either a “good thing” or a “bad thing.” Trade-offs abound. Although we are persuaded that another era in the long history of universities has begun, whether the academic profession is able to successfully negotiate its role in the new era—to preserve core values and to ensure the unique contributions of the academy to society—remains to be seen. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. We acknowledge the indispensable assistance of Jesús Francisco Galaz-Fontes and Mandy Liu in bringing the book to fruition.
- ² Martin J. Finkelstein, “The Emergence of the Modern Academic Role,” (Chap. 2) *The American Academic Profession* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 7-31.
- ³ Despite that progress, serious underrepresentation of minority faculty persists; between 1993 and 2003, the percentage of URM faculty nationally grew only 2 percent from approximately 6 to 8 percent. See José F. Moreno, Daryl G. Smith, Alma R. Clayton-Pedersen, Sharon Parker, and Daniel Hiroyuki Teraguchi, *The Revolving Door for Underrepresented Minority Faculty in Higher Education*. Association of American Colleges and Universities and Claremont Graduate University, April 2006.
- ⁴ Commission member James B. Hunt, Jr. described the report thus: “...one of the most important reports in the educational and economic history of our country.” Quoted in Kelly Field, “Uncertainty Greets Report on Colleges by U.S. Panel.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Sept. 1, 2006) 1.
- ⁵ In fact, these data are collected in *alternate* years via the National Center for Educational Statistics’ Fall Staff Survey conducted through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).
- ⁶ Richard P. Chait (see *Questions of Tenure*, Harvard University Press, 2002) has suggested that faculty turnover may be no higher among term appointees than among tenureable/tenured appointees. This is especially so at research universities where tenure rates may hover around 50 percent on average (see Dooris cited in, Robin Wilson. “Off the Clock.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol 52, Issue #46 (July 21, 2006), p. A-8.)making probationary faculty about as likely to leave as to stay beyond the probationary period. Presumably, they get picked up elsewhere in the system, of course. But so may non-renewed term appointees.
- ⁷ It is important to note that these career trajectory analyses were carried out *retrospectively* on faculty who “survived” in an academic career. We cannot precisely estimate attrition among faculty cohorts or take into account the experiences of these individuals who have moved outside the academy.
- ⁸ APOL = Apollo Group, parent company of the University of Phoenix, the nation’s largest private accredited university, enrolling some 230,000 students. COCO = Corinthian Colleges, with 94 colleges in the U.S. and 34 in Canada and net revenues of approximately \$1 billion. See *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 2005.
- ⁹ One example: Minneapolis-based Capella University, a privately held accredited online university with some 16,000 students.

- ¹⁰ As management guru and futurist Peter F. Drucker argued several years ago, “Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won’t survive. It’s as large a change as when we first got the printed book.... Already we are beginning to deliver more lectures and classes off campus via satellite or two-way video at a fraction of the cost. The college won’t survive as a residential institution. Today’s buildings are hopelessly unsuited and totally unneeded.” Quoted in Robert Lenzner and Stephen S. Johnson, “Seeing Things As They Really Are,” *Forbes* (March 10, 1997), 122-128.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Richard S. Ruch, Higher Education, Inc.: *The Rise of the For-Profit University*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, and John Sperling, *Rebel with a Cause*. New York: John Wiley, 2000.
- ¹² See Schuster and Finkelstein, *The American Faculty*, op. cit., Table 10.3, 340-341.