

Whither the Professoriate?

The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers

by Jack H. Schuster & Martin J. Finkelstein

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The American Faculty is destined to be a classic—it provides a wealth of data and arguments concerning the American professoriate in the early 21st century. Indeed, it is fair to say that this is the most thorough and thoughtful analysis of its topic in many years. The story it tells is not a particularly happy one—the American academic profession faces many challenges. Schuster and Finkelstein have written a coherent overview of the problems, how they emerged, and what they mean for the future of American higher education. *The American Faculty* is a clarion call to pay attention to the academic profession at a time of a quiet but nonetheless serious crisis and to make sure that the heart of the entire academic enterprise, the professoriate, does not collapse under the weight of its challenges.

It is easy to overlook the academic profession in the contemporary debate about higher education in the United States. American universities are widely recognized as the best in the world, and compared to the circumstances of the professoriate in many other countries, American professors enjoy relatively favorable working conditions. At the same time, there is much criticism of the higher education system—including rising costs, problems of access for some students, talk (but little evidence) of declining standards, and other problems. The professoriate

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is either ignored or is considered a group needing reform.

The American Faculty provides an appropriate historical and sociological context for understanding the professoriate—perspectives often missing in discussions of higher education. The authors point out that the concept of the academic profession has evolved over several centuries and that it has traditionally been poorly paid and denied power and prestige. Only with the advent of graduate education and an emphasis on research as part of the academic mission did professionalization take place—toward the end of the 19th and in the early 20th centuries. The authors, citing Christopher Jencks and David Riesman's 1968 book *Academic Revolution*, point out that it was only in the 1960s that the faculty achieved any significant power in American higher education.

Schuster and Finkelstein are particularly concerned about the future of the academic profession, and the trends that they see are not favorable. They point out that more than half of the new appointments to teaching positions in the United States are either part-time or full-time but non-tenure track. This makeover, they argue, does tremendous damage to higher education. These new job categories are much less attractive, and the “best and brightest” will avoid them. They are less well remunerated, less stable, and with few exceptions include no expectation of research nor little chance to participate in academic governance. The authors see this erosion of the traditional faculty career path as a fundamental shift in the nature of the academic profession in the United States.

Academic salaries are another longstanding problem. Schuster and Finkelstein, using national salary data from the American Association of University Professors and other sources, point out that academic salaries in the United States have never been particularly attractive when compared with remuneration for similarly qualified professionals. Further, they note that academic salaries, when inflation is taken into account, took a significant plunge in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was only in the 1990s that they even recovered to their 1960s inflation-adjusted levels. Academic salaries have always varied by rank, institutional type, and other variables. The authors point out that salaries are increasingly differentiated by field—with such areas as management, law, and a few others earning much higher salaries than most of the humanities. At one time, public universities had a small advantage over private institutions in salaries—this situation has been reversed in recent years, with the private schools paying more than the public ones, at the university level. The authors mention, but might have emphasized more, the growing differences between salaries at the top-ranking research-oriented universities, both private and public, and the rest of the system. Salary problems are common worldwide, and American academic salaries are looked at favorably in much of the world. Indeed the United Kingdom, for example, has been trying to raise salaries for productive academics in order to keep them from leaving for the United States.

The nature of academic work has also been changing. Examining a range of

surveys and other research studies, Schuster and Finkelstein point out that academics have become more research-oriented throughout the higher education system. As late as 1969, most academics were mainly focused on teaching; half the faculty reported that they had done no publishing in the previous two years. By 1998, two-thirds reported that they had published a book or article in the previous two years. Of course, faculty at research universities published significantly more than others. Men continued to publish, on average, more than women. The authors point out that the increased levels of research productivity have not come at the expense of teaching—indeed, teaching loads have increased, mainly because a larger proportion of the faculty now teach only undergraduate students. Again, the differentiation is between those working at research universities versus the rest. As the authors point out, Burton Clark’s characterization of academe as “small worlds, different worlds” is still valid. It is difficult to generalize about the professoriate because the working conditions, salaries, and culture vary so much according to institutional type, discipline, and other variables. One of the few problems of *The American Faculty* is the effort to make sense of the nuances of a large and variegated profession.

American faculty feel that they have a high level of influence in the affairs of their departments (two-thirds overall) but not that they have much role in campuswide affairs (15 percent to 20 percent). Further, their campuswide influence has declined since the 1960s. A solid majority (two-thirds) of academics report general satisfaction with their freedom of expression in the classroom—although this constitutes a decline of 20 percent in the past quarter century. Further, academics perceive less support for academic freedom from top administrators.

Recently, some attention has been focused on the political opinions of the academic profession, with conservatives pointing to the overwhelming liberal views of most faculty members. The few surveys available show that about three-fifths of the professoriate described themselves as “liberal,” another one-quarter as conservative, and the rest (just one-fifth) as “middle of the road.” The authors note that there has been a light shrinkage on the conservative extreme and in the middle and a discernable drift to the left—as the general public was moving to the center-right in the 1990s.

Faculty job satisfaction has eroded in the past several decades. While half of academics characterized themselves as “very satisfied” in both 1968 and 1975, only 38 percent agreed in 1998. Those dissatisfied doubled to 15 percent in the same period. This sense of dissatisfaction characterizes all sectors of the profession. Schuster and Finkelstein point to a basic restructuring of American academic life. The traditional career path is compromised. Salaries and benefits have not kept pace either with inflation or with comparable occupations. The profession feels stressed. The authors worry, as we all should, about the future of higher education. And since the universities are central institutions in the post-industrial informa-

tion-age society, there is cause to worry about the future of American society and the economy as well.

We have every reason to “trust the messenger.” Jack Schuster and Martin Finkelstein, in numerous books and articles, have been analyzing the American faculty for two decades. Their work has been reliable and nuanced. In this book, as in their other work, they have amassed an impressive array of data, including the ongoing statistical data collected by the U.S. government, the several surveys conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and many others. They have carefully analyzed this research and provide the reader not only with useful statistical tables but also with a careful discussion of the key themes. *The American Faculty* is, without question, the key source for understanding the academic profession and, by extension, all of American higher education. 