

Reforming Higher Education: A Modest Proposal

By Philip G. Altbach and Lionel S. Lewis

In the past several years, American colleges and universities have been widely criticized for a variety of ills. There have been a few scandals, such as the misappropriation of government research funds to purchase flowers and bed sheets for the President's house at Stanford University. There have also been a few well-publicized cases of scientific fraud.

The United States Justice Department has forced the Ivy League to desist from collectively deciding amounts of scholarship aid. But by far the most fundamental complaint has been that teaching has been de-emphasized in American higher education and especially at research-oriented institutions. Further, critics have pointed to a lack of professorial accountability.

The faculty, it is claimed, has arrogated to itself control over how professors spend their time. Worse, this is done on an individual basis, with each faculty member deciding on the ways he or she will spend on work time. Beyond stipulating broad minima for teaching, there are few guidelines or regulations to determine professorial responsibility. The tenure system, originated to protect academic freedom, now provides virtual lifetime jobs to faculty.

Self Over Institution

A clarion call to pay more attention to teaching was sounded by

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Ernest L. Boyer in his influential 1990 statement, *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Boyer argued that American higher education has overemphasized research and that this has decreased the amount of teaching done by faculty, increased the strains felt by professors, and skewed the priorities of the entire academic enterprise.

Henry Rosovsky postulated a variation on this theme in a 1992 valedictory address when he stepped down as dean of the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Rosovsky noted that, at Harvard, teaching loads have declined over the past several decades. The academic culture, he noted, has moved away from any sort of accountability and sense of community.

Professors, Rosovsky observed, had created new rules of conduct through *fait accompli*. They did not ask anyone for permission to be absent during the end of semester reading periods, for example; they simply left the campus. Rosovsky did not argue that the Harvard faculty are lazy or unproductive. He claimed, rather, that they place greatest value on their own needs and careers and that there is decreasing commitment to the institution that employs them.

Similar themes are noted by William F. Massy and Robert Zemsky (1992) in their work on what they call the “academic ratchet”—the tendency in research universities and liberal arts colleges to move toward lower teaching loads for faculty and a more structured curriculum aimed at majors in the field rather than a focus on general education.

Setting the Norm by Ivy League Standards

Analysts like Rosovsky, Massey, and Zemsky call for a renewed look at the “social contract” that professors have with the institutions that employ them. They argue that anarchy has become the norm of academic life. Professors are in a unique position. They are, on the one hand, employees of bureaucratic institutions while, at the same time, they see themselves as quasi-independent professionals.

Professors, unlike most employees of large institutions, are

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protected by a tenure system that not only ensures academic freedom but also—once the lengthy probationary period has been passed—offers considerable security of employment. They feel that the orientation toward research has overwhelmed the traditional focus of colleges and universities on teaching and that there must be a recommitment to teaching as the primary focus of American higher education. They imply, but do not quite say, that the teaching responsibilities of the faculty should be increased.

These professors also suggest that the new social contract might have to be imposed on the professoriate, since professors are unlikely to favor reforms that would have a negative impact on workload and autonomy. But Boyer points out that the American professoriate expresses a strong commitment to teaching when surveyed about their priorities and that a change in the focus of academe might not be so difficult.

We feel that there would be considerable difficulty in implementing changes that may alter the *status quo*. First of all, we find it curious that no one has put forward clear guidelines that will lead American colleges and universities to reform their orientations and values.

There is, moreover, a tendency among the current crop of critics to assume that all of American higher education reflects the norms, values, practices, and administrative structures of the top colleges and universities.¹ The fact is that the top institutions do not reflect the large majority the 3,500 of colleges and universities in the United States.

Forty percent of American students study in two-year community colleges, where teaching loads have traditionally been high—15 hours per week of classroom teaching is normal. At these schools, there has been no downward trend in teaching loads.

Community college teachers, a growing number of whom have doctoral degrees, are paid to be teachers and are, for the most part, rewarded and promoted for their teaching. The culture of the institutions focuses on teaching and on the close relationship

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between the college and its surrounding community, including local industries and commercial firms.

At the same time, around 80 percent of over 2,100 four-year colleges and universities are largely nonselective. High school graduates with a reasonable academic record can attend these institutions. Most of them do not offer graduate degrees, and their institutional missions largely focus on undergraduate teaching.

At these institutions, pressure to do research is modest, and academic staff are promoted for the quality of their teaching and institutional—and sometimes—community service. There is little evidence of the academic ratchet or of Rosovskyian anarchy at these institutions. Administrators have considerable power over faculty workloads and teaching schedules—and they exercise it.

University-Based Research and Technology

Even at research universities, the situation may be more complex than the current generation of critics indicates. Graduate programs in virtually all fields in the research-oriented universities are, in considerable part, subsidized by the undergraduates. Graduate students enjoy modest size seminars, mentorship by full-time faculty and, in the sciences, a fairly effective apprenticeship experience. This is possible because of relatively large undergraduate lecture classes, the use of graduate student teaching assistants, and increasingly bureaucratic advisement and administrative arrangements.

This situation is by no means a new phenomenon in American higher education. It has been going on for a half-century or more, somewhat exacerbated in the past few years by the financial problems of many universities.

Do the critics really mean to dismantle or even significantly weaken American graduate education—one of the few areas where there is worldwide agreement that the United States maintains excellence and leadership? Notwithstanding criticism of the empha-

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sis on research at the upper tiers of the academic system, university-based research has contributed a great deal to American technology.

If one asks the customers—students—what they think of the education that they are receiving in American colleges and universities, the response is overwhelmingly positive. Students like their professors and feel that they are receiving a quality education. Of course, there are criticisms of the academic experience—but these are largely focused on the bureaucracy of the universities and some other aspects of campus life rather than on the quality of teaching.

Further, despite the escalating cost of higher education—with tuition rapidly increasing in the public sector as well as in private institutions—there is no decline in demand. About one-third of the college age cohort continue their education beyond high school, and this figure has remained steady for a number of years.

The most notable growth in recent years has occurred among “nontraditional” students. Despite cutbacks in federal loan programs that place a greater direct financial burden on students and their families, demand remains quite strong.

Part-Time Faculty Considerations

All of this is not to say that American higher education is without flaws. Higher education remains a system in crisis, but, in our opinion, this crisis is generated more by the drastic fiscal cutbacks of the past two decades than by deep internal failures.

Major public universities, including those in California, New York, and Massachusetts, have suffered major decreases in state funding. Because attending public higher education has become more expensive, access, especially for students from disadvantaged groups, has become more difficult. Participation rates for African-Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics are well below those for whites and Asian-Americans.

There is an increased tendency to replace full-time with

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part-time faculty. At present, approximately 39 percent of those teaching in colleges and universities are part-timers. It is significantly less expensive to put a part-time teacher in front of a class than it is to have a regular staff member. But staff without a regular appointment have no commitment to the institution, generally do not participate in the intellectual life of the department or institution, and do not have responsibility for advising students.

Cutbacks have also decreased library resources and have made it increasingly difficult for students to graduate with a bachelor's degree in the expected four years because course offerings have been diminished.

Blaming the Victim

Perhaps the current wave of criticism is more about a desire to get more work out of faculty—to make up for fewer resources. Professors might not be teaching dramatically more at present, but they are definitely being paid less to do it—academic salaries have lagged behind the rate of inflation for more than a decade, and more than a few universities have seen salary “freezes.” In some instances, there have actually been givebacks. Thus, in purely economic terms, the professoriate is more productive.

That professors are overpaid is a myth. A small number of academics at the top research institutions and medical and law schools are paid salaries in excess of \$100,000, but the average faculty salary in the United States in 1991-92 was \$45,360—hardly a fortune.

It may be useful to imagine what impact the sort of changes suggested by the critics might have on American higher education and how reforms might be implemented. Most of the current criticism has concerned the academic profession, its commitment to teaching, and the plight of undergraduate education.

Many critics blame the current situation on faculty and imply that professors need to be whipped into shape. Whipping the faculty

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is not an easy task—tenure, well-established traditions of faculty governance, and a sense of autonomy all stand in the way. There is an implication that the tenure system also stands in the way of constructive reform. Martin Anderson (1992), for one, urges the abolition of tenure.

This is an old reproach that has been raised with regularity ever since the principle of tenure was established in the early decades of this century. Tenure, the argument goes, makes faculty slothful and arrogant. This charge has been proved in some instance, but has never been shown to be the general case.

The Top-Tiered Research Institutions

Other attacks have been more circumspect. Much discussion has focused on reformulating faculty workloads. To be sure, there are inequities in faculty responsibilities and more than a little anarchy in the system. Henry Rosovsky (1992) is right when he points to the only slightly limited autonomy of the Harvard faculty.

But Harvard is not American higher education by any means, and it is important to reiterate that America has a highly differentiated academic system. (It is worth noting, in passing, that almost all undergraduate courses at Harvard are, in fact, taught by regular faculty—not by part-timers or teaching assistants.)

Our impression is that the problem, if indeed there is a problem, exists mainly at the top research-oriented institutions. In the community colleges and most unselective four-year schools, professors teach a great deal, amid considerable accountability. Faculty members at these institutions are generally happy. Most say that if they again had an opportunity to select a career, they would become academics.

At the most prestigious schools, the situation is complex. At the apex of the academic system, the reward system is based on scholarly productivity—or rather on published books and articles and increasingly on research grants. Yet most faculty members say

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that their primary commitment is to teaching. Teaching is evaluated but the *sine qua non* is research and publication. It is worth pointing out that many professors publish little, even at the top institutions. Further, there are peaks and valleys of research productivity in the careers of most academics.

Some have argued that academic institutions should discourage the proliferation of research, that there is too much of it of too little value. They claim that the great volume of research not only wastes time and resources, but conceals truly significant work. So much research is trivial that most is never even cited by other researchers. But any kind of censorship, no matter how benign, engenders risks.

No one can determine in advance what the value of any research activity might eventually be. Determining the worth of much scholarship is subjective: what might be worthless to someone might be valuable to someone else. Besides, if a great volume of publication results in more bad work, it is also likely to produce more good work.

Clearly, there should be ways of permitting faculty members to focus on what they do best at particular stages of their careers. At present, there is little if any room for differential academic responsibilities for the professoriate. What may be needed is an arrangement so that faculty members who are active researchers have limited teaching responsibilities and make their contributions to their employers, the university, through research and advisement at the graduate level.

Is it really cost effective to have researchers involved in ground-breaking work teach undergraduate classes? It might be nice for the few undergraduates exposed to these great minds, but one wonders if this would be the best expenditure of time and resources, especially in an era of fiscal constraint.

The Scholarly Options

Other faculty members who may be less focused on research and publication can contribute more by teaching a larger number of

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classes and involving themselves in curricular and other service activities on campus. At present, such a differentiation of responsibilities is unusual.

Most professors teach the same number of courses, regardless of research productivity or graduate advisement. It would be somewhat difficult to implement a means of allocating workload. It would also be necessary to avoid “stigmatizing” faculty who focus on teaching as “second-class citizens.” But the goal is neither revolutionary nor impossible, although, given tradition and, in some cases, faculty unions, one would have to approach the question with care. Differentiating responsibilities would require good will and a sense that the mission of the university would be best served by this innovation.

American higher education needs a few improvements—and it needs a clearer statement and commitment to what Edward Shils (1983) has called the “academic ethic.” The professoriate needs to better understand the broader mission of higher education in American society. There is need for a better sense of community on campus—not only with regard to faculty workload and institutional commitment but also in terms of campus race relations, student extra-curricular life, and other factors (Spitzburg and Thorndike, 1992).²

At the same time, the basic nature of what most foreign observers see as the best academic system in the world should not be significantly changed. The research base in American higher education is a key strength. So, too, is the notion of access, the idea that everyone who has an interest in pursuing higher education and the ability to do so should have an opportunity. Professors remain the heart of the academic enterprise. We believe that the tenure system helps protect academic freedom and helps maintain academic morale and stability.

We must note again that the American higher education system is both large and quite differentiated. Solutions to problems and, indeed, the diagnosis of difficulties must take into account the

varying realities and missions of the diverse academic system. What Henry Rosovsky sees as a problem at Harvard might not be an issue at 3,300 other institutions.

The American university at the end of the 20th century is not in crisis nor does it require major surgery. Its obvious flaws must be corrected. What has significantly weakened the academic system is not the shortsightedness or avarice of the faculty but the unremitting financial problems that higher education faces. Funding must be restored to adequate levels. At the same time, those involved in the academic enterprise must take a careful look at how institutions work and make appropriate, but probably fairly modest, changes.

Notes

¹Several recent books are highly critical of American higher education from a generally conservative perspective. They attack the universities for a variety of sins, including corruption, lack of attention to teaching, and a lack of leadership. They also make the mistake of overgeneralizing based on the experiences of the authors at a handful of prestigious institutions. See Martin Anderson (1992), George H. Douglas (1992), and Richard M. Huber (1992).

²See also Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) and Philip G. Altbach and Kofi Lomotey (1991).

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