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The Parlous State of Academia: When Politics, Prestige and Proxies Overtake Higher Education's Teaching Mission


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The parlous state of academia

When politics, prestige and proxies overtake higher education's teaching mission

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Original and significant research benefits the careers of those running universities and brings prestige to their institution. World class teaching, by and large, does not, and this has important consequences for higher education's tripartite mission. Most notably, emphasis on the research mission of major higher education institutions dwarfs that of the teaching mission and this is to the detriment of teachers and students. Policy interventions are needed to address this discrepancy.

Keywords: higher education, administration, research mission, teaching mission, policy intervention

It is no secret that in the last several decades, the numbers of those running universities (referred to here as 'academic administrators') have increased dramatically whereas the growth in the number of tenure track academics ('faculty' in US parlance) has been only modest, and the trend is projected to continue (Occupational Outlook Handbook, Postsecondary Administrators, 2014-2015). For the purposes of this paper, 'academic administrators' include occupants of positions with titles such as president, vice-chancellor, provost, deputy vice-chancellor and pro-vice-chancellor, dean and perhaps a few other titles. Indeed, between 1993 and 2007, the number of full-time academic administrators per 100 students at American research universities grew by 39 per cent, whereas the number of employees engaged in teaching, research

or service per 100 students only grew by 18 per cent (Goldwater Institute, 2010). To take an extreme example, during this period, at Arizona State University, the number of academic administrators per 100 students increased by 94 per cent whereas the number of employees engaged in teaching, research and service per student actually decreased by two per cent (Goldwater Institute, 2010). This trend transforms how universities operate in a way that has a negative impact on the teaching mission of higher education.

Detriment to tenure track academic staff

Although universities were, historically, self-governing bodies where tenured academics played a principal role

in the university governance, academics' governance has been eroded (Ginsberg, 2011; Rojstaczer, 1999; Executive Committee of the UM Chapter of AAUP, 2014). University governance has become a specialised niche of academic administrators. To counter this trend, protests have occurred recently on several campuses, most prominently at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Inside Higher Ed., 2014), to fight for better pay and reclaim authority on issues such as curriculum development.

The excessive power of high-level administration was apparent when, recently on several campuses, deans and tenured academics were fired for speaking out and criticising budget cuts that would jeopardise academic programmes. A recent example is that of Robert Buckingham, tenured professor and executive director of the School of Public Health at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada, sacked because he 'demonstrated egregious conduct and insubordination' (Huffington Post, 2014). Another example is that of the Director of Undergraduate Research at Virginia Tech, Tomalei Vess, who was fired for pushing to increase resources for undergraduate research (Corder, 2013). In both of these cases, dismissal occurred in spite of – or because – they fought for programmes and policies to benefit students. When university leadership cuts programmes in response to budget constraints, entire academic departments may disappear, but administrators do not go away (Schuman, 2013).

Detriment to adjunct/contingent/casual staff and students

Although central to a university's mission, teaching does not contribute to research universities' prestige, so academic administrators have little incentive to invest a large share of resources to fulfil this mission. The thought is that tenure track academics can 'best' be used to their maximum potential by focusing on their research. Although programmes such as the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Bold Experiments seeks to redress this imbalance, many research universities increasingly rely on adjunct or contingent staff (in US parlance, non-tenure track teaching academics, often hired on a semester-by-semester basis) to do the brunt of the teaching, especially of large undergraduate courses. (The Australasian equivalent of these staff would be 'casual' teachers or those on

similarly precarious contracts). Despite the fact that such personnel are frequently overworked, underpaid, and do not have access to institutional resources (including office space) (Allen, 2013; Hall, 2014; Schuman, 2014b), a recent study found that students' learning is actually enhanced when the course instructor is an adjunct versus a tenure track teaching staff member (Figlio, Schapiro, & Soter, 2013). Why not, then, grant exemplary contingent academics the benefit of being able to obtain tenure too? As argued previously, universities could create specific career tracks for research and teaching (Grant, 2014), and recognise the contributions of good teachers as much as those of innovative researchers. The current system short-

changes both the contingent labour force and the students they teach.

Additionally, and strikingly, student debt and the use of low-wage adjunct labour have both increased faster at the high-executive-pay schools than the national

average (Erwin & Wood, 2014; Lewin, 2014; Wilkins, 2014). Furthermore, student debt increased the most at the universities where executive compensation also increased the most: 'average student debt of graduates in the top 25 public universities with the highest executive pay increased five percentage points more or 13 per cent faster than the national average from summer 2006 to summer 2012' (Erwin & Wood, 2014). Clearly, a university education is becoming less and less accessible – especially to less-privileged students – while academic institutions benefit from tuition fee rates that have increased much faster than inflation. If providing quality, affordable education is the mission of colleges and universities, why is it that the leadership is compensated the most at institutions rife with student debt and the use of contingent instructors? Administrators are obviously benefiting to the detriment of students. To point out the absurdity of this situation, Canadian professors recently organised themselves to apply for the open position of vice-chancellor at the University of Alberta – in groups of four (Schuman, 2014a).

Universities are shifting to one mission: research

Research is the main priority pushed by academic administrators. Universities push their academics to excel at research and win grants because of the prestige

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and revenue they bring into the university to pay for the research mission. However, most researchers and administrators overlook the true cost of research. It often comes as a surprise that research actually costs universities more money than it brings in; analysis reveals that for every grant dollar brought in by researchers, universities lose between 15 to 40 cents (Dorsey, Van Wuyckhuysse, & Guzik, 2009). In other words, grant revenue is not sufficient to cover the total costs of the research mission. Certainly grants help cover the cost of research, and indeed, organisations simply couldn't be in the research game without grant funding, but the point is that playing the research game does not bring in money – on the contrary.

Why the drive to do research, then? World-class research brings the university prestige, attracting top academics and gifted students, as well as more grant money. Increasing research funding also allows academic administrators to build 'empires' on campuses and climb the administration ladder for their own personal gain. Department chairs grow their department then leave to become deans. Deans implement and operationalise strategy and policy for their gain to become provosts. Provosts oversee goals, missions, and visions to become presidents. Presidents lead to build legacies and/or to be promoted to even larger roles. The research enterprise becomes not an end in itself, but merely the context in which these political games are played.

Recommendations and conclusion

Higher education is now run as a business, and while many of the universities are not-for-profit, they are increasingly run in such a way to maximise profits to benefit the leadership. If education is run as a business, then it should function as one: academic administration should examine budget items, evaluate costs and personnel, adjust logistics, and ensure that the university's operations are aligned with its missions of teaching and research. In business, the profits are shared among the stakeholders. Because even private universities are heavily supported by public (federal) money, the stakeholders at colleges and universities are not only the academic administrators and all other staff, but also the students and even the public at large. So, resources should be distributed accordingly and no constituent should benefit to the detriment of another.

Administrative priorities are sometimes egregiously misaligned with the best interests of students and staff. Recent protests by students and staff point to the fact that policy reform is necessary to make academic

administrators accountable to all students and staff whom they are supposed to serve. Flaws in institutional structures currently allow academic administrators to transform universities into businesses for their own benefit while exploiting the workers (especially graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and precariously-employed teachers) who create value and neglecting the major teaching mission of higher education. Although a university must remain financially solvent, its purpose never was – and should not be – to maximise profits for the benefit of the leadership.

Policy intervention is necessary to redress the power balance, make administrators accountable to all students and staff, and ultimately allocate resources (money and information) in alignment with the interests of students and academic staff.

To begin discussion on this topic, we suggest the following policy interventions:

1. De-centralise administrative power: tenure-track and adjunct / contingent / casual academics should have a voice in university governance. Decision-making should not be the specialised niche of academic administrators, but rather, a distributed and democratic process. Academics should be expected to participate in university governance, and given the time and resources to do so. This might require reducing the teaching and research loads of faculty members while they serve on university-wide committees. Students should also be given the opportunity to play a more active role in university governance.
2. Establish accountability mechanisms: there should be a more transparent feedback mechanism for student and staff satisfaction to be incorporated into academic administrators' performance evaluations.
3. Universities should adopt financial models that logically and fairly support each mission of higher education: a transparent mechanism should be created to support research, teaching, and service in a way that allows each area to flourish for the benefit of all stakeholders. Such a model should support both financial and intellectual value creation. For the teaching mission, one way to do this would be to create tenure lines for those staff focused on excellence in teaching and to fund these appropriately.
4. Establish pay ratios (Erwin & Wood, 2014): administrative salaries could not exceed, for example, ten times that of the lowest paid full-time academic staff member. This would not cap administrative

salaries, but it would prevent inequities from growing to unacceptable levels.

5. Establish spending ratios (Erwin & Wood, 2014): ratio of spending on non-academic administration to scholarships could be set at, for example, 2 to 1. This would help make higher education more affordable and discourage rapid tuition fee increases. Spending on specialised research instruments (which would be used by a few select students) should also be balanced with spending on classroom technology and online course development (which is likely to benefit a larger population of students).
6. Balance the decision-making bodies: boards of trustees should be composed of individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Ensuring a socioeconomic diversity in decision-making bodies would reduce the chance that decisions be made to benefit a small but powerful group to the detriment of the university community; inclusive representation would promote equity within the university community and ensure that decisions are made to benefit the community as a whole.

We believe that these issues should be openly discussed among the higher education community. As such, we hope that this article will aid in stimulating a healthy debate and discussion of these topics among all of academia's stakeholders.

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