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Notes on Higher Education in the 1990s

Zelda F. Gamson

This article consists of a series of essays written for The Academic Workplace, *the newsletter of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, since 1990. The backdrop for the essays is the increasing inequality in higher education caused by changes in the political economy of higher education, especially in New England. The first essay analyzes the roots of contemporary faculty dissatisfaction with their work lives by tracing the impacts of the expansion of higher education, changes in the student body, and greater government involvement in higher education. Subsequent essays discuss multicultural education, faculty shortages, political correctness, responses to cutbacks, the evaluation of quality, and the collective life of academia. Altogether, the essays present a rather grim look at higher education in the 1990s, leavened by a few suggestions for change.*

When I spoke with Padraig O'Malley about writing an article for the Education issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy,* I realized that I had been writing pieces of it for several years. The New England Resource Center for Higher Education, which I founded in 1988 as a project of the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts Boston, began publishing *The Academic Workplace,* a newsletter, in 1990. When the Resource Center joined the new Graduate College of Education at the university, it continued publishing the newsletter. This article draws from some of my writing from selected issues.

The article reflects my own growing awareness of the struggles colleges and universities would be experiencing in the last decade of the century. It is very much situated in my own experience of higher education. After more than twenty years at the University of Michigan, the flagship university in a state where public higher education is dominant, I moved to a state in which private higher education enjoys an unparalleled preeminence. This became more obvious as the decline in the economy of New England led to cutbacks in support for public higher education in

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Massachusetts and other states in the region. In my consulting and research trips to colleges and universities in the region and in the various ongoing think tanks and seminars convened by the Resource Center, I was educated about the divide between poor and rich institutions, whether public or private. My growing understanding of the fateful implications of this divide sets the backdrop to the following essays about higher education in the 1990s.

Fall 1990: The Roots of Faculty Dissatisfaction

This essay is drawn from a position paper I wrote, in collaboration with Sandra Elman and Ernest Lynton, for the first conference organized by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education in December 1989. Entitled "Challenges of the Academic Workplace: Improving the Quality of Faculty Work Life," the conference anticipated many of the ideas pursued by members of the Resource Center in the years to follow.

Most faculty members have lived through unprecedented changes in the nature of their institutions and in social attitudes toward higher education. Many faculty feel that the rules of the game they entered in the 1950s and 1960s have been rewritten repeatedly, in ways over which they have had no control. They have understandably found life in their institutions unsettling, occasionally even threatening. Three general problems have had the most impact on faculty dissatisfaction: (1) the gap between student performance and faculty expectations; (2) a feeling of isolation from administrators and other faculty members; (3) limited opportunities for career advancement.

Faculty have been especially unsettled by the people to whom they are most deeply dedicated: the students. In the past fifteen years, a noticeable gap has developed between the skills and interests of students and the expectations and experiences of their teachers.

Academic work tends to be individualistic under most circumstances; recent years have turned individualism into isolation. Faculty have reacted strongly against increasing bureaucracy on their campuses and a resulting isolation from the administration. Less obvious, but not less disappointing, is the isolation of faculty members from one another.

These disappointments with their students, their institutions, and their colleagues have left many faculty feeling stuck. Most faculty members live out their careers in the same department. As full professors, they do essentially the same work they did as assistant professors, but they experience few of the satisfactions that come with moving up in an organization.

Let us examine the roots of these three aspects of faculty discontent in the larger forces that have acted upon colleges in the past three decades.

The most obvious force affecting academic work life has been the sheer growth of higher education in the United States. In 1950, there were 1,859 colleges and universities in this country; in 1982, there were 3,273. In 1950, there were 2 million undergraduates and 240,000 graduate students; in 1980, there were 11 million undergraduates and 1.1 million graduate students. Growth in and of itself has affected the working conditions of the average faculty member. It has tended to introduce additional layers of administration and to create more distance between senior

administrators and individual faculty members; it has also tended to narrow the vision of individuals to ever smaller portions of their institutions.

These negative effects of growth matter less when resources are plentiful, as they were in the 1960s. In times of steady state or contraction, they intensify competition and isolation. The result is greater fragmentation within institutions and increased rivalry among departments and individuals. For many faculty, this means intellectual insularity and a feeling of being trapped. This feeling grew especially intense during the 1970s, when support for higher education began to decline. The pressure in the last fifteen years to do more with less has hit the faculty hard.

The impact of growth fades in comparison with the effect of changes in the student body. The majority of the faculty now teaching in our colleges and universities entered academia during a period when higher education was undergoing a dramatic transformation, from being places for well-prepared middle- and upper-class students to places open to almost anyone. This egalitarian revolution came at a time of decline in high school preparation, resulting in what the vast majority of faculty perceives as students who are woefully unprepared for college work.

The growth of higher education and the egalitarian revolution have been accompanied by changes in the relationship between the academy and government. Substantial portions of college and university revenues come from federal, state, and local government. When dollars are scarce, appropriations for higher education suffer along with everything else and policymakers ask more questions about how public dollars are spent. More government regulation adds to the pressure.

Government involvement in the affairs of the academy is intensified by the recognition of the contributions of higher education to the economy, through its production of an educated labor force, research, and technology. This perception is double edged. It has rekindled public appreciation for higher education, which sank to a low point in the 1970s, but it has also intensified scrutiny of higher education's performance. Legislators and government officials want to see evidence of the qualifications of graduates and the usefulness of research. These three forces will make life immensely more difficult for the faculty of the 1990s than it was for the faculty of the 1950s. The decline in the quality of faculty life has left the professoriat, in the words of Howard R. Bowen and Jack H. Schuster in *American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled* (Oxford University Press, 1986), "dispirited, fragmented, and devalued."

We offer three recommendations for improvement in the quality of faculty work life: (1) leaders of colleges and universities must pay more attention to articulating their institutions' purposes; (2) colleges and universities must become more collaborative; (3) persuasive programs for career planning and professional development must be instituted.

Colleges and universities have always run on the commitment of the people who work in them. Commitment is a precious resource, one that turns out to be a key to the productivity of most organizations. It is based on employees' sense that the institution in which they work is worthy and cares about them. Leaders are crucial in shaping the atmosphere that gives rise to these feelings. Indeed, most effective organizations have leaders who constantly articulate their institutions' beliefs and values.

Exactly how to articulate purposes in a college or university will depend on the institution's history, student body, and mix of emphasis on research, teaching, and service. Any effort to do so, however, should try to define who the students are or should

be, what skills and knowledge they should acquire, and how they will demonstrate what they have learned. Many colleges and universities around the country have found that asking these questions as specifically as possible, and then taking action to deal with the answers, goes a long way toward closing the gap between student interests and skills and faculty expectations.

Collaboration involving faculty participation in decisions that affect them is a complicated but necessary condition for improving their relations with administrators. Leaders must make hard decisions, but they should do so by involving as many people as possible in developing ideas, writing and discussing position papers, and building support for decisions. To work together effectively, faculty members and administrators must learn the skills of collaborative decision making.

There are many examples of faculty working together within and, more important, across disciplines. Creating new curricula, establishing learning communities that group several courses or offer interdisciplinary studies, and setting up research teams can help create faculty community. Collaboration among faculty from different institutions — on service and teaching as well as research — is also valuable and is becoming more common around the country. Projects in public agencies and businesses develop new relationships and enrich teaching. Faculty members find renewed meaning in their careers as they work in networks on improving writing, developing new materials on women and minorities, and teaching their students to think critically and creatively.

Colleges and universities do a poor job of rewarding faculty for the activities they wish to encourage. Even in teaching-oriented institutions, faculty are often promoted and given raises according to the number of articles and books they publish. While publication brings some luster to scholars and their schools, it does not help much in the daily life of institutions. Nor does it necessarily contribute to the improvement of teaching. Therefore, a close analysis of how faculty are rewarded and promoted is the first step toward improving faculty life.

Along with an examination of the reward structure, an all-out effort to expand mobility and choices for faculty is needed. Innovative workload arrangements, rotation into administrative posts, and internships in government and industry are being tried in institutions around the country. Human resource development, common in business and industry, is just arriving in higher education in the form of faculty career counseling, preretirement planning, and growth contracts.

Sabbaticals, faculty exchanges, and conferences and workshops on the latest issues in pedagogy and curriculum are also more common today. Specific activities are less important than the organizational climate in which they take place. Leaders must actively encourage faculty to take risks and grow, and they must put resources into helping them do so. They will then discover what should be obvious to all: that the faculty is a renewable resource.

Spring 1990: Multicultural Education

This essay was written in response to a forum on multiculturalism organized by the Resource Center at the University of Massachusetts Boston, with speakers and participants from colleges and universities in the Boston area.

> We want to move from *tolerating* differences to *celebrating* them.
> — Carolyn Elliott, associate provost, University of Vermont

> What are our private visions for the future? What are our visions for the society?
> — Michael Morris, dean of the college, University of New England

> We found that an office with "minority" in its name didn't get used by the students we were trying to reach.
> — Donald Brown, Director, AHANA, Boston College

> We want every piece of our cultural heritage to be incorporated and repeated again and again in our community life.
> — Piedad Robertson, president, Bunker Hill Community College

These comments from panelists in a forum organized by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education frame the theme of this issue of *The Academic Workplace,* "Taking Responsibility for Creating the Multicultural Campus." As administrators and faculty members across the country have dealt with bigotry and violence on their campuses, they have come to see that they must change the quality of life on those campuses. They cannot wait, as Michael Morris put it, for a "gradual trickling down" of change.

In struggling over what to do, they have learned that how they talk about the various manifestations of bigotry matters very much. We have chosen to use the word *multicultural* at the risk of sounding trendy. My dictionary defines culture as the "totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population." Those who argue that we need a more multicultural campus mean that colleges and universities must encourage the expression of a broader array of behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, products, and thoughts than we have heretofore. Those who argue against this view say that colleges and universities need to bring those from other cultures into a common culture. It's an old argument in American life, one we will probably never settle.

Fall 1990: Faculty Shortages

This essay was stimulated by a study of faculty labor shortages in comprehensive colleges and universities in New England, which I was carrying out with several colleagues in the Resource Center.

Because I am codirecting a team of researchers who are studying faculty shortages in New England, I am keenly aware that "shortage" is a definitional matter. In 1884, Harvard had 19 professors with Ph.D.'s, in a faculty of 189; Michigan had 6 Ph.D.'s in a faculty of 88. Few, perhaps none, of the faculty included women or blacks. Did Harvard and Michigan have a shortage of Ph.D.'s in 1884? Of women? Of blacks? Probably not, given the standards of the time. Our standards have changed. We want faculty with doctorates. We no longer seek only males and white skins but females and people with other skin colors as well.

As my colleagues and I have been interviewing senior administrators, department chairs, and faculty members in comprehensive colleges and universities, we have encountered more than a little skepticism about faculty shortage projections. A large number of departments have not hired a new tenure-track faculty member in years, and some feel they may never hire one. Some have had to fire faculty because of reductions in state funding or enrollment shortfalls. Others have been under hiring freezes for so long that they have forgotten how to carry out a search. Many fill vacancies with temporary appointments to the "gypsies" of the "lost generation" who earned their Ph.D.'s during the glut of the 1970s. The gypsies are anxiously awaiting the shortages, lest they be too old by the time they materialize. When there is an opening for a regular position and a search committee carries out its work, there is a good chance that it will be aborted because of financial problems.

These experiences are not universal. Colleges and universities with the wherewithal are raiding one another as well as less fortunate institutions. They are wooing graduate school stars around the country with offers of housing, support for spouses, and release time. "Stockpiling" faculty against retirements has become a preferred practice in the schools that can afford it. The result is that the shift in the faculty labor market may only increase the substantial inequality among colleges and universities at a time when the troubled economy is hitting some public and private institutions hard.

Spring 1991: Political Correctness and Inequality in Higher Education

This essay was written in response to the wave of media attention to attacks on colleges and universities for promoting a "politically correct" line.

You don't have to be from Massachusetts and from an embattled public university to feel the financial pinch these days. The *Chronicle of Higher Education,* as well as the *Boston Globe,* is carrying news of enrollment shortfalls and sacked administrators. It is clear that higher education, like other industries, will have to live with a lower rate of growth, no growth, and even contraction in the years ahead. But the way colleges and universities go about their business was laid down in times of expansion. It will be most difficult for colleges and universities — notoriously slow-moving creatures that they are — to shift from a culture of plenty to one of scarcity.

The temptation, of course, is to return to an earlier, presumably simpler time. Institutions under stress, like individuals, are bound to feel a strong pull from earlier stages in their development. We may find ourselves longing to go back to the time when students were more serious, when the faculty spoke the same language, when things were just less complicated.

I have been watching with no little amazement the attacks on "politically correct" thinking in the mass media, which provide the symbolic justification for regression in a time of competition for scarce resources. Is there a struggle over whom to hire in the one open faculty line in the English Department? Accuse affirmative action of being coercive. Do some faculty members assert that the required readings for general education courses reflect the experience of European men? Defend Western civilization as if it were under attack from the barbarians. Do some students need extra help to get through college? Define the problem as one of moral virtue and focus attention on the students who can handle the curriculum without extra help.

Cutbacks have been disproportionately borne by poor students and poor institutions and by the women and minorities who have only recently been appointed to senior faculty and administrative positions. They are the inadvertent victims of the regressive urge. It will take great maturity on the part of faculty members and administrators, boards of trustees, and policymakers to resist regressive solutions to fiscal problems.

Fall 1991: Cutbacks and Restructuring Colleges and Universities

This essay draws on stories and observations from colleges and universities in New England as they coped with too little money and too many responsibilities.

The news from New England is now news in the country at large: there just aren't enough resources to do everything we wish to do, or even were able to do yesterday. We may decry this news. We may realize that it has more to do with national tax policies and business investment decisions than with anything college and university people are doing. Whatever the reasons, with less money coming from the states and tuitions, many colleges and universities are unable to continue doing everything they are doing, let alone grow.

New Englanders know this and are struggling to respond sensibly. Even institutions that are not facing shortfalls are operating as if they were in a scarcity economy. At the moment, the most common response is a speedup, from the president on down. Presidential staffs are being cut, and those who remain are asked to pick up the jobs of those who have departed. Provosts and deans are adding more programs from other realms of the institution to their portfolios. Department chairs are doing more paperwork and faculty are teaching larger classes and advising more students. Meetings, it seems, are increasing exponentially, and every spare moment is being filled. People are having breakfast meetings, luncheon meetings, dinner meetings, even weekend meetings.

In this respect, higher education is in tune with the rest of America, where the average number of hours worked has increased and leisure time has decreased in the last fifteen or so years. The result has been a certain raggedness in human relations and a lot of personal wear and tear.

Something's got to give. In my observation, most people in higher education work hard. It will not be possible to stretch the human resources — ourselves, our colleagues, and our staffs — beyond a certain point without serious consequences, not only for them and us but for our institutions. Colleges and universities especially rely on the good thinking of the people who work in them, and good thinking does not come from exhausted people. As a friend of mine at a leading research university complained, "I'm so busy I don't have time to think. If I want to think, I have to leave the university."

How do we deal with the situation? We must recognize that we cannot do as much as we used to. We must tell ourselves and others that we cannot do a good job at everything with major declines in resources. If we do not have enough resources to do what we are doing now, we must *redefine* what we do, *restructure* the way we do it, and just do less. In the short term, we will all try the speedup approach; in the long-term . . .

Spring 1992: Quality and Keeping in Touch with Practice

This essay was inspired by graduate students, many of them practicing secondary school teachers and counselors, in a course I taught on controversies in education.

I was struck the other day by a phrase in a paper by one of my graduate students. Toby Maguire, an English teacher, argued for the importance of involving workers, be they teachers, nurses, or laborers, in the evaluation of their work. Relying exclusively on administrators and others outside the classroom leads to simplifying the complexity of teaching. "Without being fully immersed in a situation like the classroom," he wrote, "a person cannot assume an adequate perspective of the practice."

Maguire's paper reminded me yet again how important it is for administrators and policymakers to take "an adequate perspective of the practice." Administrators, even those who formerly taught, often lose that perspective. They appoint faculty to run committees badly, which consumes so much time that faculty are hard pressed to prepare a good class or write a well-thought-out article. They make changes in budgets, such as reductions in classroom maintenance or library acquisitions, which undermine the quality of the core activities of their institutions.

The problem of undermining the quality of core activities is not limited to college and university administrators, who are often less guilty than others. School principals, for example, may reassign teachers with little warning and fail to provide them with the tools they need to teach. Heads of social service agencies may require therapists to punch a time clock. Only from the "perspective of the practice," when there is a serious effort to understand what it takes to do a good job, do efforts to increase efficiency and accountability achieve their goals without undermining quality.

Judgments about quality must take another perspective into account, that of the consumer, the client, or the student. Just as administrators lose the faculty perspective, so almost everyone loses the perspective of the student. I have become aware of how little my colleagues and I know about our students' lives. Even when we have regular conferences or make assignments that require students to apply course material to their own lives, we know little about their experiences outside the classroom.

Spring 1993: The Poverty of Collective Life in Academia

Discussions about changing faculty roles do not recognize that the decline of academic community needs to be addressed first. The following essay grapples with this issue.

What do faculty hate most about their jobs? The committees and the meetings and the administrative trivia. In several surveys carried out recently, faculty say that they spend, on the average, over one-quarter of their time on administration and other duties beyond teaching and research. When they have been asked about their preferences, 35 percent said they want to do less service and 40 percent said they want to do less administration.

Current discussions about faculty roles pay little attention to faculty as institutional actors. Yet efforts to increase sophistication about teaching or to broaden the definitions of scholarship depend upon dealing with faculty as institutional actors.

Why do I say this? First, a significant portion of faculty on many campuses are barely institutional members, let alone actors. They turn up on campus for their classes and meet with their students, often doing a conscientious or even inspired job. If they are involved in some scholarly work, they will go to the library or the laboratory or to their homes, but rarely will they stay in their office, where interruptions can be constant. If people are needed to join a committee on student life or serve on a faculty search, they are nowhere to be found. "Where are they," several members of the Resource Center's think tanks have asked, "when we need them?" "Even if they can be found," other members have answered, "you wouldn't want them to get near contemporary issues of student life or a faculty search. They are too out of it, too indifferent, too incompetent."

It is hard to imagine how efforts to increase attention to teaching or to redefine scholarship will get these institutional nonactors to even hear the new ideas. Well, then forget about these faculty — never mind that in some institutions they are the finest teachers and the most productive scholars — and focus on the ones who are institutional actors. What will we find if we ask them to join up? If they have been around for a while, they will tell us that they are already on too many committees. That they have seen similar efforts come and go, that it's another case of being asked to do the administration's job.

Are they just whining? I don't think so. Institutional life in many colleges and universities is deeply flawed. These flaws are technical, political, and communal. Technical flaws — the everyday ones that eat up time and corrode the spirit — include committees with poorly defined tasks, chaired by people who do not know how to run meetings, spinning their wheels on topics that go nowhere. These committees are usually set up by short-staffed department chairs and administrators who do not take the time to instruct the committees or provide them with the support they need to do the job.

Conflicts are rampant in the institutional life of colleges and universities. Instead of dealing with those conflicts directly, administrators appoint faculty to an ever increasing number of committees and commissions. By doing this, they honestly want to show that they encourage faculty participation in decision making. When these committees and commissions sometimes fail to have the impact their members wish, the faculty become even more alienated.

The result is the degradation of communal life and further withdrawal, with previously active faculty joining the ranks of the inactive. It is sad to see faculty, especially the younger ones who are our future, embrace institutional life in the hope of fellowship and community only to end up bored, dispirited, and cynical.

What is to be done? I do not have all the answers by any means, but I am sure there are things we can do to improve our communal life. First, we must recognize the problem and understand that individual remedies will probably not improve things very much. Second, we should distinguish between administrative and policy matters and limit the use of faculty time on administration. Third, we should deal with conflict through the proven techniques of mediation and negotiation. Fourth, we need to learn how to work better in groups, as people in other realms of American life are learning. And fifth, we need more collective free time and space in which we can talk with one another about things that matter without the pressure of having to solve a problem or achieving a specific goal. ❧

"Does the present curriculum prepare students for the twenty-first century? I don't think so. The idea of funding public education through community property taxes does not work."

— Roger Harris