

The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers by Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. (2006) 572 pages.

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Schuster and Finkelstein never use the term “postmodern,” but their comprehensive analysis of the national data on faculty roles and appointments reveals a profession in the full throes of the postmodern era. Rapid, discontinuous changes in economic structures, communications technologies, and government policies are loosening the footholds of the traditional academic career. The tenured or tenure-track faculty member struggling to achieve balance among teaching, research, and service is now a decided minority within the professoriate. Reflecting broader employment trends around the globe, academic work is now largely conducted by a contingent labor force.

Schuster and Finkelstein describe a trend which they now consider to be “old news” – the increasing number of part-time appointments (currently standing at 46% of all faculty). They focus more attention, however, on what they believe to be a dramatic but heretofore less recognized restructuring of full-time faculty appointments. The majority of newly-hired full-time faculty are off the tenure track. In 2003, 58.6% of all new full-time faculty were appointed to positions for which tenure was not a possibility. Within the entire population of full-time faculty employed in 2003, 34.8% held non-tenure-eligible positions – a percentage that is poised to grow dramatically if current off-track hiring practices continue.

Schuster and Finkelstein point out that the growing use of non-tenure-eligible, term appointments is not due to institutions abandoning their tenure systems. Instead the growth is explained by the development of a parallel employment track which is more prevalent for faculty in low-demand majors such as humanities and liberal arts, and is more common in the mass-provider, comprehensive universities than in the research universities or elite liberal arts colleges (the community college sector has largely opted for part-time appointments). This development suggests that tenure and the associated protections of academic freedom are available for a dwindling proportion of faculty – reserved primarily for faculty in elite institutions and for those in high demand fields. Thus it is conceivable to argue that the increasing marketization and commodification of higher education has eroded tenure and academic freedom more so than any efforts by trustees or policy makers to eliminate the policy. In effect, impersonal economic trends rather than highly-visible political battles have been the corrosive agents undermining tenure and academic freedom.

Compensation differences have also contributed to fragmentation within the faculty. Salary differences among academic disciplines were fairly modest until the mid-1970s. With a few notable exceptions (law, medicine), faculty members could expect comparable pay regardless of whether they taught chemistry, art history, or sociology. Schuster and Finkelstein’s analysis of more than three decades of salary trends, however, found sharp and growing divergence where faculty in fields with high demand (such as finance and computer science) were earning considerably more than faculty in low demand fields. Differences in appointment statuses and compensation rates cause Schuster and Finkelstein to question whether “the faculty” as a

cohesive, unified body continues to exist. The picture, again, is of postmodern fragmentation and further stratification within the profession.

The loosening of the traditional strictures of the professoriate, however, may also generate new opportunities to reconfigure the academy in ways that incorporate a more diverse array of perspectives, values, and backgrounds. New types of faculty appointments (such as non-tenure-eligible faculty who focus only on teaching), for example, may accommodate a wider range of values regarding the importance of teaching. In fact, the data suggest that after a 1980s dip, attention to teaching has rebounded among faculty members.

Similarly, if traditional images of the faculty member are discounted, then individuals from previously under-represented groups may find a more welcome reception within the academy. Here, the data are mixed. Schuster and Finkelstein found that the proportion of women faculty has increased from 17.3% in 1969 to 35.9% in 1998, and nearly half of all new faculty hires are women. However, women are twice as likely as men to be employed in non-tenure-eligible positions, and the average salary of women faculty is still only 82% of that paid to their male counterparts – a disparity that has remained nearly constant for the past three decades. In 1969, only 3.8% of faculty were members of racial or ethnic minority groups, but by 1998, nearly 20% of new hires were racial or ethnic minorities. But these gains have not erased under-representation in many fields such as the health sciences, and gains in other scientific and engineering fields appear to be related to the hiring of foreign-born faculty, primarily from Asia.

Indeed, most workplace trends in the postmodern era contain both positive and negative elements. Another example is information technology, which has made accessible to students and faculty previously unimaginable types and quantities of intellectual resources. But IT has not contributed the efficiencies that many had promised. IT now consumes 10% of institutional budgets, up from only 2 to 3% in the early 1990s, and faculty encounter increasing time pressures for shifting courses to new online delivery modes. Moreover, Schuster and Finkelstein note that there is some evidence to suggest that IT is contributing to an “unbundling” of the faculty role, whereby teaching tasks are further disaggregated and distributed to different employees – some specializing in curriculum development, others in content delivery, and still others in assessment of learning outcomes. These new roles may be contributing to the rise of full-time, non-tenure-eligible appointments and to the growing cadre of part-time faculty who teach in online programs.

In addition to the unbundling of the instructional role, there appears to be a concomitant “speed up” in expectations for faculty work. Faculty are now working approximately 20% more (48.6 hours per week compared to about 40 hours in 1984), but earning only 70% of the median salary for other highly-educated professions. Schuster and Finkelstein raise concerns that faculty salaries may not be sufficiently competitive to attract the “best and brightest” to the professoriate.

Schuster and Finkelstein’s text illuminates changes in the professoriate as it evolves in a postmodern era, characterized by more diversity, stratification, and fragmentation than perhaps at any time in the history of the profession. Through meticulous analyses of more than three-decade’s worth of national faculty surveys, Schuster and Finkelstein allow readers to check their

assumptions against the available data. The range of issues examined is impressive: research and teaching productivity, faculty job satisfaction, the effects of unionization, faculty roles in governance, turnover and retirement projections, and the prevalence of salary compression between different faculty ranks. The text devotes more attention to issues in the four-year sector than in community colleges, and the focus on comprehensive data description may frustrate some readers who seek quick, ready-made solutions. But Schuster and Finkelstein's analyses illuminate the key policy debates surrounding faculty roles, and provide data that all policy makers should consider before attempting to reform or restructure faculty roles and appointments.