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The Evolving (Eroding?) Faculty Job

A week ago, [new data on faculty salaries](#) showed that professors' pay fell behind inflation for the second year in a row. A month ago, when a federal commission studying higher education released a paper on reasons that college costs so much, it identified professors — [their power and tenure](#) — as a prime culprit.

Feeling underappreciated and under siege? Does your job feel unstable?

There's a reason, according to two of the leading scholars of the professoriate. They have just finished what experts are calling a landmark study of the professoriate, which argues that we are experiencing "a revolution" in academic life that will be equal in its lasting significance to such events as the importation of the research university model to the United States in the late 19th century or the "massification" of higher education after World War II.

"Seismic shifts are profoundly changing how knowledge is acquired and transmitted," and while it is unclear where these changes will lead the academy, it is certain that faculty jobs are changing — and changing in a big way. That is the central thesis of [The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers](#), by Jack H. Schuster and Martin Finkelstein, just published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

Many of the themes of the book won't shock anyone who has been working in academe lately. Among them:

- The pace of change has accelerated dramatically. While new models in higher education historically have taken decades to establish themselves, today's changes are having nationwide impact very quickly after they emerge.
- Government and the public have come to think of higher education as an industry with a key role in the economy, not as a separate entity that should be left to itself.
- The faculties and student bodies of colleges are much more diverse than they used to be.
- There has been enormous growth in the use of part-time faculty members, and far greater growth rates for those jobs than for full-time jobs. Similarly, full-time faculty positions off the tenure track have grown.
- Enrollments have moved away from the liberal arts and toward the professions, with a resulting shift in faculty jobs.

All of these trends are backed up with data. The graphs, charts, and statistics come from a variety of published sources (the Education Department, foundations, college groups) and aren't new per se. But the authors focus on long-term changes, not the one-year increases that tend to capture attention when new data come out. Linked together over 555 pages, with analysis from Schuster and Finkelstein, the information adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

Two key points that are likely to worry faculty members is that the professorial career has gotten more difficult — and that many of the best and brightest are looking elsewhere for employment.

In terms of workload, the authors cite data, for example, that show that the average weekly hours worked at their institution by full-time faculty members is up to 48.6 — from just over 40 in 1984. But digging more deeply into the data, the authors found that the percentage of full-time faculty members who work more than 50 hours a week has doubled since 1972 — reaching nearly two-fifths. And the percentage of faculty members working more than 55 hours a week has grown to 25.6 percent from 13.1 percent. And these, of course, are full-time faculty members, not those who must shuttle from campus to campus in unpaid commuting time.

With faculty members working long hours, wages falling behind inflation, and changes in the full-time/part-time ratio meaning considerably less job security, an important concern is the quality of those entering the professoriate. Here, the book finds very mixed conclusions. Surveys of graduate programs and hiring committees indicate a very high quality of applicant (and plenty of them, in some cases a clearly overflowing pool).

But the book also notes a variety of surveys of the career plans of the kinds of people colleges might hope are considering careers in academe, and their numbers are dwindling. The book examines a series of surveys of the career aspirations and finds that academe isn't what it once was. Declines have occurred in the percentage of Rhodes Scholars, Luce Scholars, Watson Fellows, Phi Beta Kappa members, and entering college students over all who aspire to a career in teaching.

While the figures may be discouraging, the book's tone is not one of complaint, but of drawing attention to how dramatic various changes are.

Finkelstein, one of the authors and a professor of education at Seton Hall University, calls himself an optimist and says that the jury is still out on whether the changes outlined in the book will make higher education better or worse. "If you look at this from the perspective of what the faculty role has been like from the '50s, this doesn't look encouraging," he said. But Finkelstein added that professors of earlier generations looked at the changes around them and worried about the profession becoming less desirable, and that didn't happen.

While there is less job security, "there are different kinds of opportunities today," especially through distance learning, that didn't exist before, he said.

And he sees one of the major conclusions of the work being that you can't talk any more about the faculty job — since it has evolved in so many directions. "Historically, the model was that everyone did the same thing," he said, adding that while the relative proportions for teaching, research and service might differ at different kinds of institutions, the basic job duties were similar. "I think that model is falling away," he said.

The other model he sees these trends changing is one where a young faculty member would seek an institution at which to build a career. The trends related to employment patterns mean that more and more faculty members will need to be mobile and flexible.

Whether these changes are good or bad isn't clear, Finkelstein said, even though many in academe think

otherwise. For example, it is taken as a given by many that the growth in the use of part-time professors hurts students because, however hard adjuncts work and however thoughtful their lectures, they can't be physically present on campuses so students can drop by, or serve on curricular committees, or have influence in the college equal to their teaching role. All of that might be true, Finkelstein said. But those who criticize the reliance on part-timers assume that the alternative is more full-time slots. What if that's not the case, and the alternative is untaught sections and the remaining students are either turned away or squeezed into larger and larger sections?

Finkelstein said that he hopes the book will encourage a research agenda that might explore such issues.

While Finkelstein might appear to have a comfortable perch from which to talk about all of the change in higher ed — he is a tenured professor — he knows something of what it means to shift an academic career. He was going after a Ph.D. in medieval literature in the early 1970s at Columbia University, when he decided the job market was bleak. He switched gears to studying higher education, earning a Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1978. He started off the tenure track, at the University of Denver, and his position was eliminated when the university faced budget problems. So Finkelstein said he understands that these trends aren't academic, but affect many people's lives.

[Schuster](#), a professor of education and public policy at Claremont Graduate University, has worked as both a scholar and administrator. Looking at academic careers today, he said that “there have never been guarantees of course, nor should there be. But in prevailing market conditions that in many fields are not especially favorable to new entrants, the likelihood is surely slimmer for carving out a ‘traditional’ career.”

An academic career still has many great advantages, he said, and some of the surveys cited in the book show that faculty members who do establish themselves feel good about their jobs. So the “prize” may still be worth going for, he said. To some extent, he added, academe may benefit because no one has it good — doctors and lawyers also complain about conditions not being as supportive as they were in the good old days. “Even if the conditions of academic work are not as rosy as they may have been, the competing professions for top talent appear not as attractive as they once were,” he said.

He said that his main goal in writing the book was to force people to look at all of these trends together and plan accordingly. “The academy is undergoing transformative, even revolutionary, changes,” Schuster said. “Yet it appears to me that the leaders of the academy may be inadequately aware of the extent of these changes and the potentially sweeping implications. I hope that our book serves to draw attention to these challenges.”

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
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