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Following the Cuts

How Is the Recession Affecting Faculty Work?

FEATURED TOPIC

Higher education leaders' responses to the recession remain focused on enduring, rather than on taking advantage of recession opportunities in key mission-focused ways

THE RECESSION of 2008–9 and the continuing decline in local, state, and federal funds available to support higher education have resulted in serious budget cuts and belt-tightening. Given that faculty constitute an institution's most costly resource, it was not surprising, though it is nonetheless disheartening, to learn of the University of Arizona's, the University of Nevada Las Vegas's, and the California State System's massive reorganization and

personnel layoffs, which have resulted

from recession-related financial pressures. These three institutions are not alone in implementing these cost-cutting strategies. Such cuts may seem inevitable in states that have also to decide how much, rather than whether, to cut services to K–12 education, health care, and public safety. Yet what often gets lost in policy discussions during times of scarce resources are the strategic ways in which faculty can be a most valuable resource and asset during a recession.

In this article, we examine the state of the academic profession and faculty working conditions in the current recession with two purposes in mind. First, we provide real-time insights into what is happening to faculty across the country. Second, we discuss the implications of several recession-driven strategies affecting faculty work—especially the implications for student learning.

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Institutional responses to the recession

Little research has so far been conducted on how higher education institutions are responding to the ongoing recession. To provide a preliminary understanding, we synthesized data indicating the variety and prevalence of these institutional responses. We collected these data by searching via the Internet for available documentation of institutional responses to the recession. Through the use of online search engines, we searched national news periodicals, websites of major national higher education groups, periodicals specific to the field of higher education, and news media more broadly. Our criteria for identifying responsive measures were: (1) a new, cost-saving action was taken during the recession, and (2) a campus spokesperson affirmed that the action was taken in response to recession-based fiscal pressures. We then considered these actions in light of the research and theory on faculty work and working conditions. The data we synthesized were published between May of 2007 and June of 2009. Altogether, we compiled information from thirty-eight sources, which yielded information on the actions of seventy-four colleges, universities, and state systems (fifty-four public and twenty private). We categorized each action according to seven common measures: (1) freezing hiring, (2) adjusting pay, (3) limiting professional development, (4) dismissing faculty and consolidating programs, (5) cutting academic unit budgets, (6) increasing teaching loads, and (7) shifting faculty appointments.

It is important to note that cost-cutting measures are implemented in specific and varied contexts. For example, California's budget shortfall is especially dramatic, and the severity of response measures there reflects that context. Moreover, each institution is faced with



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a unique set of contracts and obligations to its employees. This helps explain, for example, why the state system in Maryland has furloughed its faculty several times, whereas the Massachusetts system, whose faculty are unionized, has not. Each institution also has different assets to be shifted or expended. No doubt differences in endowments, overhead for grants, and income from revenue-generating centers have all affected campus and system-level decisions.

Nonetheless, the cost-saving measures we identified result from certain shared assumptions and viewpoints, and they have major implications for faculty work. While research on the short-term effects is underway, we will not know the long-term opportunity costs of these measures for some time. Existing research on faculty work and productivity does, however, indicate the likely shape and direction of the effects, and we discuss this below within each of the three categories of faculty work: teaching, research, and service.

Our analysis of cost-saving measures suggests that most campus leaders have focused on

improving cost efficiency. The rationale for this choice is similar to the rationale for perpetuating the increasing shift toward contingent labor. It is rooted in a corporate business philosophy known as scientific management (Bolman and Deal 2008; Perrow 1986), which assumes the labor at different stages of an assembly line can be exchanged and manipulated purposively to produce the same product with less effort or cost. The philosophical assumptions and management techniques underlying this paradigm of organization also precipitated the introduction of top-quality management and strategic planning to colleges and universities in the 1980s and 1990s (Birnbaum 1998). The effect for labor is that it turns the employee into a task-oriented technocrat, rather than a professional expert, and it tends only to consider aspects of the higher education process that are quantifiable (e.g., the number of students in seats, rather than the quality of faculty-student relationships) in evaluating performance. Many scholars and leaders in higher education have critiqued this perspective and its application

to decision making in colleges and universities, noting that it does not distinguish between collegial and hierarchical cultures and that it does not recognize fundamental differences in higher education goals, processes, and labor (Birnbaum 1998; Rhoades 1996). In 2000, Robert Birnbaum critiqued the flow of management techniques into higher education, citing what he saw as a common assumption in them that “if we could just run our universities as General Motors is managed, most of our educational problems would vanish” (215). Given the condition of the major US car companies in the last two years, few campus leaders would adopt this particular metaphor today, yet the operating assumptions it represents remain intact.

Exemplifying the alternative, despite endowment losses, Bard College President Leon Botstein has chosen strategically to expend resources, requisitioning funds raised in a capital campaign for campus construction and reallocating them toward the college’s core academic missions in the arts and sciences (Jaschik 2008). Instead of executing a strict cost-cutting agenda, Botstein has embraced a cost-effectiveness approach that provides room for investment in the central academic work of the college. He has literally moved investments in the bricks of campus buildings to the people within their walls. This approach to budgeting is also reflected in Colorado State University’s “Commitment to Colorado” program, which began in the fall of 2011. Beckie Supiano (2010) reports that Pell-eligible, in-state students will have their entire tuition and fee costs met by a combination of federal, state, and university aid; additionally, Colorado families making up to the state median income will have at least half the cost of tuition met with grant aid. The university’s expenditure on financial aid will increase by two million dollars, and while some of those funds will be generated through tuition revenue, unspecified budgetary reallocations will make up the rest. This investment is taking place despite state cuts in funding to the university over the past three years. While many other aggressive student-aid initiatives across the country have scaled back their commitments since 2008, Colorado State University has found a way

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to expend resources in accordance with its mission-based priorities.¹

With these two examples before us, we make three critical points. First, we posit that the efficiency argument is hazardous to mission achievement. Second, the alternative cost-effectiveness approach can be an available and superior

option. As Bard and Colorado State have demonstrated, finance strategy can be shifted to protect and improve quality in central campus programs, as opposed to maintaining or expanding offerings at the edges of institutional mission. Finally, third, we return to the repeatedly used faculty union mantra that faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. Larger class sizes, greater course loads, and decreased faculty autonomy and reward are likely to result in a reduction in student learning opportunity.

Teaching

Teaching takes up the majority of faculty work time, across appointment types (Fairweather 2005; Antony and Raveling 1998). Outside of direct classroom hours faculty engage in many teaching-related activities that have an impact on the learning process, including but not limited to designing new courses, preparing lessons, remaining current in a discipline, grading student work, meeting with students, and exchanging e-mail with students about course content (O’Meara, Terosky, and Neumann 2008). Likewise, while many institutions have full-time academic advisers for undergraduate students, much of the career development and preparation for graduate school still falls on the shoulders of full-time faculty. This involves meeting with students, writing letters of recommendation, and maintaining a strong network that can be mined for internship and job opportunities for students.

All seven of the cost-cutting measures identified above conceivably impinge upon faculty teaching and advising capabilities. Among our research sample, hiring and salary restrictions are linked: the majority of institutions (80 percent) and state systems (57 percent) that have implemented salary freezes, cuts, or faculty furloughs have also implemented hiring freezes. Logically, this makes sense; if you

cannot pay the faculty you have, why hire more? Yet, for faculty, the national trend toward increasing admissions means increasing teaching loads. As a result, their time spent per student, per paper, and per class must necessarily decline, suggesting a similar decline in the quality of their teaching and advising work. Moreover, teaching and related responsibilities must necessarily replace time spent in research and service roles, which suggests similar effects on the quantity and quality of work in those areas. In both cases, the nature of such an imposition on faculty work reduces the professional latitude traditionally afforded to noncontingent faculty, as experts in defining their own work. As this autonomy decreases and faculty work becomes more technocratic, a propensity develops for the job to become less attractive. In turn, this suggests a likelihood of reduced investment in work by current faculty members, as well as discouraged aspirations for talented rising scholars.

Our study found that relatively few campus spokespeople have identified increases in contingent hiring related to budgetary reductions. There are three possible explanations for this. First, few campuses are hiring contingent faculty because they are not hiring, period. In this case, simply not contracting for a new semester is tantamount to firing many of these faculty members, regardless of their value as teachers. Contingent faculty, who are contracted on a per-semester basis, are often used as a budget “flexibility” mechanism in hard times (Goldstein 2005). A second possible explanation is that institutions are hesitant to report further increases in contingent hiring, particularly if they have been working to improve their academic reputation. Recent studies suggest that, in certain settings, part-time contingent faculty are less effective teachers than full-time tenure-line faculty because they are less likely to use high-impact teaching practices (Benjamin 2002; Umbach 2007). Also, part-time faculty have been found to be less effective in retaining college students and helping them succeed in gatekeeper courses (Jaeger, Thornton, and Eagan 2007). Given the long-term trend toward increased contingent labor, however, this explanation is unlikely.

While the current recession did not cause the unbundling of faculty roles, neither will a return to prosperity cause the reintegration of faculty roles

The most broadly plausible and perhaps most troubling explanation is that campus leaders simply do not know where the historical trend of increasing contingent hiring on their campus ends and where the recession-responsive hiring begins. As Bland et al. (2006, 117) observed, “unfortunately,

most schools’ current collection of faculty appointment types have not occurred as a result of thoughtful planning but rather through uncoordinated decisions by individual subunits of the institution.” Failure to differentiate between hiring decisions made because of the recession and decisions made as part of an ongoing cost-efficiency strategy could easily cause underreporting. Likewise, it would necessarily undermine any institutional efforts to maintain or improve quality of teaching through control of faculty appointment type.

Cost-saving measures that may seem only to affect faculty members can have related effects on students. To better measure and demonstrate the effects of the recession on faculty teaching and student learning, future institutional researchers will need to take into account student evaluations, faculty satisfaction, changes in course load and faculty-to-student ratios, and outcomes assessments of hiring practices instituted during the downturn. Key institutional indicators for judging teaching effectiveness, with the benefit of a post-recession perspective, will center on changes in such student success indicators as job placement rates, retention rates, and graduate school attendance rates from before the recession, through it, and in its wake.

Research

Restricting conference travel and tightening academic budgets have a clear and direct impact on faculty research capabilities. Without paper and ink, for instance, where are faculty to go to print tables and transcripts? Without conference travel, how are they to vet their research and gain attention? Nearly one-third of our sample have instituted travel restrictions and curbed professional development opportunities, inhibitions likely to prove injurious to those campuses’ relative research productivity.

Another concern centers on who is not doing research. As part-time and other contingent



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appointments have risen dramatically in recent decades, replacing the norm of tenure-track labor with a nearly three-to-one norm of contingent labor (American Federation of Teachers 2009; Schuster and Finkelstein 2006; Umbach 2007), there are real concerns that research has been “unbundled” out of the majority of new faculty appointments.

Part-time and full-time nontenure-track faculty members are hired almost exclusively to teach, at the cost of service and research responsibilities, and they are frequently under-supported and underremunerated in that work (Gappa, Austin, and Trice 2007; Umbach 2007). Additionally, as research increasingly becomes the defining characteristic of tenured and tenure-track faculty work, the potential exists for these faculty members to conceptualize their work primarily in terms of research, to the detriment of their teaching and shared governance responsibilities. Massy and Zemsky (1994) famously described this challenge

in terms of a vicious cycle, “the academic ratchet,” a process by which faculty members engaged in research tend to privilege that work over teaching and service, and being rewarded for it through appointment, tenure, and promotion experiences encourages them to maximize the imbalance. Alternatively, Milem, Berger, and Dey (2000) found that while faculty time on research has increased over the past twenty years, so, too, has time on teaching. Thus, in practice, the academic ratchet appears complex. However, the increasing proportion of faculty members being appointed to research-noninclusive roles and the decreasing proportion of faculty members being appointed to research-inclusive roles mark a shift in the nature of faculty work toward specialized roles.

While the current recession did not cause the unbundling of faculty roles, neither will a return to prosperity cause the reintegration of faculty roles. Yet current budget constraints may offer opportunities to reassert the importance

of comprehensive faculty roles. This will not be an easy argument to make, however, as research to date has shown inconclusive relationships between faculty scholarship and excellence in teaching. Pascarella and Terenzini (1995), for example, observed from a meta-analysis that good teachers do not have to be good researchers. At the same time, Astin and Chang (1995) observed that where institutions have created a strong balance between being student-centered *and* maintaining a research-active faculty, those faculty tend to be full time, engaged in interdisciplinary and team teaching, working with undergraduates on research projects, and designing new classes related to their research. In effect, these faculty display qualities of the “integrated professional” (Colbeck, O’Meara, and Austin 2008), blending teaching and research roles in service of key higher education missions. Campus leaders who want to make growth-oriented investments should consider how these two roles can be mutually enriching.

Service

As we have suggested, something somewhere has to give when teaching and advising loads are increased and furloughs are implemented. And since in most institutions service is less appreciated than either research or teaching, faculty service may give the most. Engaged faculty members often work over long periods of time to develop effective community partnerships and applied learning experiences for students. Yet the seven cost-cutting measures identified above threaten the time and capacity of faculty to engage in long-term partnership development. Whether because of job security, increased teaching load, or because of shortages of faculty in departments, this important faculty role and the crucial work it facilitates may be at risk. Some campuses have created centers for community engagement to support this work and to strengthen and even expand university and faculty commitments to communities that create projects of lasting scholarly, pedagogical, and public value. Yet many institutions have closed their engagement offices or slashed budgets for faculty professional development. Given changes in teaching and knowledge production that require deep partnerships between faculty and “publics” (Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011), it is vitally important that such centers not be regarded as peripheral.

In addition to service to external communities, we are concerned about faculty involvement in campus governance during the recession. As layoffs and hiring restrictions reduce faculty numbers and impose additional duties on those who remain, committee requirements will increase. This may result in reduced effort across committees at a time when many colleges and universities are involved in major decisions with long-term implications for student learning. For example, a recent survey of chief academic officers found that 89 percent of institutions are at some stage of assessing or modifying their general education program (Hart Research Associates 2009). Many campuses also have important decisions to make about whether to move more programs online and whether to build new buildings (Burgan 2006). Further, major shifts are required in faculty evaluation systems to bring them up to date with a more diverse faculty, technological changes in how research is conducted and disseminated, and trends in interdisciplinary and engaged work (O’Meara 2011). Who will take on these roles if full-time faculty members are eliminated, overburdened, or deprofessionalized? Finally, academic leaders have tended to emerge from the ranks of full-time tenure-track faculty with committee service experience. Yet these ranks are now so thin that the pipeline supplying academic leadership is weakening (American Council on Education 2008).

The problem of who will perform the core, often unrewarded stewardship of service may be the most foreboding and far-reaching of all. Faculty should be the key players in designing the curriculum, making strategic-planning decisions, and creating faculty evaluation systems. They know this work better than any other institutional constituency, and they also have formal avenues for controlling this work through shared governance. While administrative leaders share the burden of campus leadership, faculty have a unique responsibility to look after the academic mission.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities are primarily charged with the creation and dispersion of knowledge. Thus, teaching is absolutely central to the mission of all institutions of higher education, and research and service are also central to the missions of many four-year institutions.

Funding for nonacademic pursuits should be reallocated to shore up strained teaching and learning environments

Perhaps this assertion is best expressed in juxtaposition with those endeavors that are not as fundamental to mission. Some pursuits, such as funding student organizations and supporting residential learning experiences, supplement and even enhance academic education. Others, like big-time athletics or venture initiatives (even academic ones) driven by institutional aspiration and mimicry, threaten to siphon critical funds from core academic improvements. The economic crisis brings such unaffordable distractions into sharp relief. Rather than cutting both academic cost and quality, campus leaders should recognize the necessity to invest in and invigorate faculty work, particularly in ways that enhance the quality of academic processes and products.

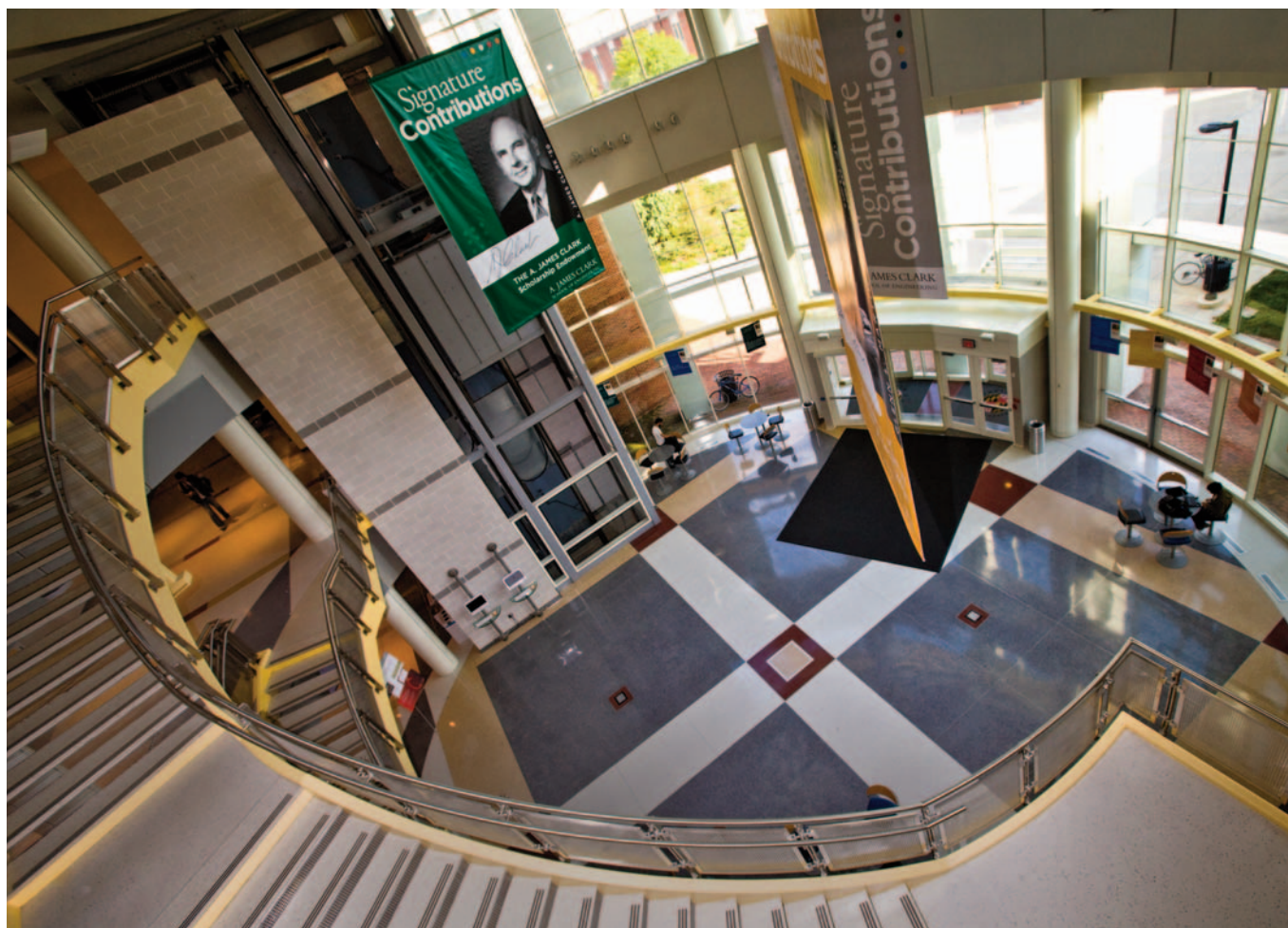
Research tells us that class size matters to student learning (Kokkelenberg, Dillon, and Christy 2005) and that appointment type is

associated with the types of pedagogy employed (Umbach 2007) as well as with student retention (Jaeger, Thornton, and Eagan 2007). Accordingly, funding for nonacademic pursuits should be reallocated to shore up strained teaching and

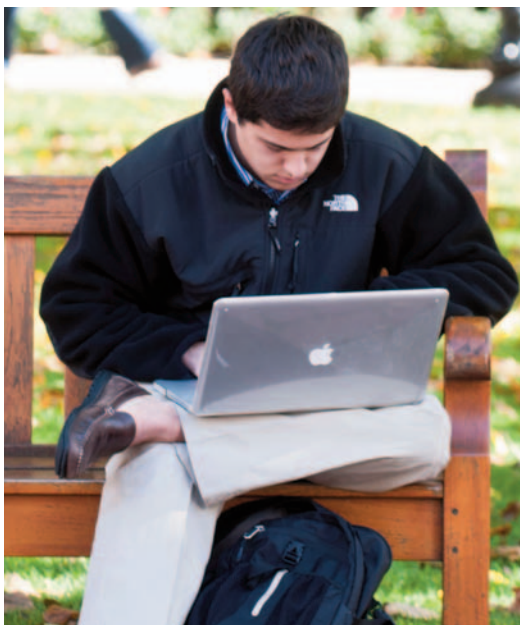
learning environments. Likewise, faculty research agendas, shared governance, and external service should be supported as critical activities, even at the cost of secondary and noncritical pursuits. Faculty layoffs, across-the-board hiring freezes, mandatory furloughs, nonstrategic changes in faculty work responsibilities, and other restrictions should be recognized as detrimental to the core function of any college or university. Where other cuts can be made in order to sustain and build academic effectiveness, they must be.

It is important for academic leaders making budget decisions to consider the long-term ways in which full-time—often, though not

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exclusively, tenure-track—faculty add value to the institution. In 1996, Ernest Lynton encouraged academic leaders to “reverse the telescope” and consider not just individual faculty work, but individual activities in the context of overall department contributions. Similarly, we believe academic leaders need to use a wider, longer lens to consider the implications of current budget cuts and decisions. For example, alumni are more likely to give to an institution if they had a positive experience there, including significant out-of-class contact with faculty (Clotfelter 2001; Monks 2003). How is contact time being preserved and leveraged in the recession? Is work being considered as an investment? Further, many states have produced workforce development reports showing major shortages in key areas such as STEM, K-12 education, nursing, and computer science. To what degree are campuses looking ahead and investing in faculty positions or in professional development for current faculty to create or grow these programs? National surveys reveal that an increasing number of faculty want to become involved in service learning and community engagement but lack the resources or reward structures to do so (Higher Education Research Institute 2009). Given that today’s students desire experiential, interdisciplinary, and problem-oriented experiences such as service learning and community-based research, can more be done to maximize existing intellectual capital in these areas? Responding to these sorts

of questions requires a far more sophisticated approach to budgeting.

Breneman (2002) suggests that the substantive significance of past recessions has been the responsive actions undertaken by higher education leaders, rather than any lasting impact directly extending from fiscal losses. The following observation, made by Cameron in 1983, remains applicable in the current context: “when faced with conditions of decline, administrators define these problems exclusively as resource allocation problems or problems of efficiency, and they respond conservatively rather than innovatively.” In other words, higher education leaders’ responses to the recession remain focused on enduring, rather than on taking advantage of recession opportunities in key mission-focused ways. Many leaders have not seen beyond the threat of fiscal decline to envision the underlying opportunity. The result is detrimental to faculty teaching, research, and service. □

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NOTE

1. It is important to note that according to our own research Colorado State University has simultaneously engaged in faculty hiring restrictions, academic budget reductions, and faculty layoffs. Thus, the praise we offer its academically centered efforts in student aid are tempered with concern that some of the budgetary trade-offs enabling that initiative likely come from cuts to the faculty side of the academic enterprise. Still, the investments in student aid represent a departure from broad stroke cost-cutting endeavors during the recession, and we recognize that innovation as such.

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