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COMMENTARY

The Marginalization of Faculty and the Quantification of Educational Policy: Lessons from My Many Years on Faculty Senates

by Howard P. Segal

Beginning as a junior at Franklin and Marshall College, continuing as a graduate student at Princeton University, and persisting for 30 years now at the University of Maine, I have served on senates consisting of faculty, staff, administrators, and students. In each case, there have been tensions, if not conflicts, between administrators and everyone else on the senate. In addition, for several years now I have had a blog in the *Bangor Daily News* entitled “Education: Future Imperfect,” which has given me an opportunity to discuss many issues and receive some useful feedback from readers. Over these several years, I have reached some conclusions about higher education and policy that apply to public colleges and universities across the country.

The two basic issues, as elaborated upon here, are the huge growth of administrators and the simultaneous reduction in full-time tenure-track faculty; and the quantification of almost everything in public higher education. I do not claim to be wholly original in my examples, which have been discussed by others for years now, but I do claim to put these changes in greater historical perspective than is usually the case. It has become common to treat these changes piecemeal rather than collectively, as if the reduction in faculty is only an economic issue. Likewise, is it limiting to ignore the historical context, as if the quantification of almost everything in public higher education sprung

up in just a relatively short period? It is no accident that the respected *Journal of Policy History* is only 30 years old. In those three decades, the history of higher education has matured greatly, as has the history of public policy. But if historians of each specialty wish to make more than a dent in affecting public policy—the dream of ambitious scholars—they need to push harder into the mainstream.

It is hardly a revelation to blame the growth of administrators—from maintenance supervisors to special assistants for presidents and other top officials—for these bureaucratic explosions. To be sure, the growth of bureaucracies in sectors besides education—for example, the military or corporations—has always been justified as a means of handling ever more workers. The payoff for ever greater staff at all levels, it is argued, is efficiency and profits. In the absence till now of analyses of the kind provided by Christopher Newfield’s illuminating *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (2016), it is easy to simplify and distort the more complex truths.

Newfield rejects the conventional wisdom that ever more administrators is both a virtue and a necessity; that part-time instructors without regular jobs are worth the tradeoff from full-time faculty; that the convenience of online distance learning is also worth the loss of traditional face-to-face teaching; and that the principal purpose of (especially)

taxpayer-supported public universities is job training, job creation, and bolstering local and state economies. This argument that Newfield rejects has little room for the traditional liberal arts despite repeated examples to the contrary by less technocratic reformers. This argument in turn rationalizes the enormous cuts from legislators and governors. As Newfield argues, ever more students at public universities are paying more and getting less.

Through enormous research and readable charts, Newfield demonstrates that legislative investments in public higher education should be increased, not decreased; that business models adopted from the private sector do not always work; that growing student debt levels epitomize much of the problem; and that the vision of Justin Morrill must be revised and updated but not abandoned. For example, Morrill opposed coeducation—so much for his alleged belief in basic democratic values for all—but did promote working-class and middle-class male students.

No less important, the traditional assumption that public higher education was a public good has increasingly disappeared. Private institutions need not justify their existence in this fashion and certainly not to the public sector. By contrast, as a periodic wave of anti-science and anti-intellectualism pervades American culture, ordinary citizens are ambivalent about cuts to funding: good in the short run but potentially dangerous in the long run. Alas, the arguments on both sides should be presented with greater sophistication than is usually the case. Presenting such arguments is an area where the faculty senate could play a crucial role and provide more than a shouting match. Different though the two realms are, they do not need to be mortal enemies.

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Faculty senates do challenge, but rarely reduce, the remarkable growth in academic administrations and the increasing centralization of policy formulation. As Mary Burgan points out in her 2006 book, *Whatever Happened to the Faculty? Drift and Decision in Higher Education*, even in the crucial area of governance, where faculty traditionally held sway, administrators have increasingly reduced faculty power and influence. In my experience at the University of Maine, for example, the faculty senate has steadily lost input into the composition of critical campus-wide search committees and has had less input into searches for new presidents and other top administrators. A couple of years ago, the University of Maine System (UMS) chancellor discussed a tentative decision about extending the term of the then-interim UMaine president with student leaders, both undergraduates and graduates, but completely bypassed the faculty senate, even its president. That was no accident. The shallow argument that noneducators alone should decide policy invariably prevails.

Yet if the boards of trustees or regents or directors of other institutions were prohibited from appointing their fellow corporate executives or military officials or financial experts on the grounds that they must come from other sectors, there would inevitably be an uproar. Yet this behavior is the norm at the University of Maine System and it has led to the appointments of some trustees without college degrees or without any college courses under their belts to other appointments of persons who falsely believe that running a private company requires the same skills and perspectives as running a public university. How naïve.

Meanwhile the emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and

mathematics) courses and programs serves both to marginalize ever more faculty outside its sacred boundaries and to quantify ever more of what remains. UMS trustees and chancellor, among others, routinely single out STEM for praise, not only because they can claim a direct connection between those programs and future jobs, but also because STEM subjects lend themselves to quantification. Courses, programs, and majors that are by definition less quantifiable are deemed inferior: art, music, literature, history, and philosophy, for instance. To be sure, some institutions have added “A” to “STEM” (STEAM) to embrace the arts, but in general, some faculty and programs feel less important than others, which is not good for the institution overall. Ironically, one can trace the term *the useful arts* in definitions of science and especially technology to the early nineteenth century. Harvard Professor Jacob Bigelow (1787–1879) used the term in his many lectures and in the several versions of his influential book growing out of those lectures, *Elements of Technology* (1829, first edition).

The other crucial issue facing faculty senates these days is the quantification of almost everything: from algorithms and metrics replacing traditional qualitative measures of students’ evaluations of faculty; to instructors’ grading of students; to fundraising for older buildings versus newer ones; and the complex relationship between academics and athletics. The senate would be the ideal forum in which to pursue these issues.

Not only do administrators tend to overvalue programs that are easily quantifiable, but I have also seen some administrators revive forms of scientific management, a theory devised and popularized in the early 1900s by the controversial American mechanical engi-

neer Frederick Winslow Taylor. As a historian of technology and science, I routinely illuminate the long-acknowledged pseudoscientific nature of Taylor’s stopwatch as a means of saving time and money. Yet, I have recently heard the term invoked by some administrators ignorant of its actual history. Through centralization of services, the assumption goes, the university will be able to slash procurement costs. While centralization may work in some cases, the decisions are often made without input from faculty and staff who have actual experience in specific processes. How shortsighted.

Taylorism could be applied successfully in some instances but hardly all. When, as with Taylor’s favorite example of coal mining, some workers could earn more because their hands-on duties gave them some flexibility, workers in other industries that were automated—like auto assembly lines—never had a say in determining the nature or speed of work.

So, what is to be done?

First, faculty senates should increase the formal policy discussions that are otherwise less likely or nonexistent, being left to top administrators and trustees. The creation of faculty senates has been an important means for faculty and, in some cases, staff and students to discuss policies of mutual interest and concern. The three senates of which I’ve been a member were set up to ease growing tensions arising from various issues in the 1960s and 1970s—coeducation, free speech, campus protests, endowment investment and divestment, role of students in tenure and promotion decisions, campus design and redesign, and athletics. I do not mean a wholesale return to the issues and the passions of those earlier decades as times have changed, but an appreciation for “the good old days” can provide useful perspectives for our time.

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Second, a look back at the successes and failures of the original faculty senates can teach all involved today how to respect others' divergent opinions with civility. Pointed debates on substantive topics somehow managed to work most of the time. As in local, state, and national discussions and policy formulations outside of education, the trick is to combine informed opinions on all topics with a level playing field in which all interested parties can participate.

Third, use the senate to enlighten important nonsenators—trustees, top administrators, legislators, alumni, and business and union officials—to appreciate how faculty and staff spend their time in addition to teaching, committees, and grading. It is dismaying to see the limited knowledge on the part of many leaders outside of education about the very institutions that they run or at least profess to run. Yet those noneducators can still be useful if they take some time away from only sexy and remunerative aspects of the university and come to appreciate what else is going on.

Fourth, use the expertise of noneducators on the board of trustees to save huge expenditures promoting the image of public colleges and universities. It is increasingly common for universities to hire expensive outside experts that claim automatic legitimacy precisely because of their nonacademic ties. When, for example, the UMS in recent times (and likely earlier) wanted to designate campuses akin in size, population, to its seven campuses, untold funds were paid for outside consultants. In fact, any number of UMS staff could have found the needed information at little or no cost—as with Google! Only if the board of trustees could offer perspectives from their own nonacademic professions and businesses could one defend this practice.

Fifth, boards of trustees (or directors or regents) should include at least one member with substantial educational experience in higher education. If it's important for these boards to include a diversity of civic, business, and financial leaders, organized labor leaders, military leaders, and women and minorities, it is surely crucial to include at least one person with a significant educational background, which is not the current practice of the UMS Board of Trustees.

As a further step to reduce the marginalization of faculty, deans, provosts, and even presidents should be encouraged to teach at least one course—a once-a-week seminar, for example—a year. This requirement should also apply to administrators with faculty appointments. Teaching a class would help administrators keep in touch with students, and would be especially useful for administrators “from away” who may not otherwise have much contact with students. It would also make administrators more aware of issues faculty face as they balance teaching, preparation, grading, office hours, and public engagement.

With few exceptions, public higher education in America is in crisis. For at least a quarter of a century, traditionally hearty allocations by state legislatures and governors have shrunk. It has become routine for public colleges and universities to raise tuition and other fees and, equally important, to seek funding from the private sector.

No less important, the traditional view held by most Americans—not just college-educated ones—of public higher education as an intrinsic good for the entire country has faded. Where, for example, the passage of the 1862 Morrill Act and the establishment of the land-grant system embraced the liberal arts as

well as engineering, agriculture, and science, nowadays the almost exclusive focus is on practical studies and their immediate applications. Job creation, especially at the local and state levels, is the name of the game. The result is the marginalization of liberal arts faculty, students, departments, and majors. US Representative and later Senator Justin Morrill (of Vermont) would be appalled. Notwithstanding ample evidence of the liberal arts being highly practical in countless fields, many presidents and other senior administrators and many trustees (and directors and regents) refuse to get away from the conventional wisdom and to remove the blinders distorting the truth. Thus the lifelong value of writing and analysis in most fields generated by the liberal arts is either ignored or distorted. The faculty senate should be the logical forum for discussing this topic.

Complementing this shallow and dangerous perspective is the obsession with quantifying almost everything. Obvious questions about student enrollment and retention, student financial aid, athletics, faculty salaries, and the endowment deserve routine answers in the senate.

But controversy arises when for example, course evaluations are limited to checking off boxes on computers or other devices without any opportunity to say more about classrooms and labs, the instructors, readings, writing assignments, freedom of speech (where pertinent). Further controversy arises when nonacademics decide about computer programs and library orders, neither of which they know much about, including costs.

But that need not be the case everywhere. The countless discussions at many faculty senates on the role of academics versus athletics can instead be

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helpful to all parties. There is no need to be antagonistic. Let athletic directors and coaches learn more about the pressures placed upon varsity athletes to do well in the classroom. And let faculty learn more about the pressures upon varsity athletes to do well on the playing field. The opportunities offered varsity athletes for academic tutoring (usually less available to other students) might become a model for other students, say those with disabilities.

Finally, the growing transformation of public universities from multifaceted institutions into de facto apprenticeship ones with a technocratic ethos is unfortunate, even tragic. Here again, faculty senates should contest these developments while seeking some measure of common ground.

If faculty senates are not panaceas for the challenges facing public higher education, they do offer the most practical means of rectifying the Great Mistake. They cost little or nothing, unlike outside consultants. 🐉



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Segal has been Adelaide and Alan Bird Professor of History at the University of Maine, where he has taught since

1986. His books include *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*, *Future Imperfect: The Mixed Blessings of Technology in America*, *Technology and Utopia*, *Recasting the Machine Age: Henry Ford's Village Industries*, *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities*, and with Alan Marcus, *Technology in America: A Brief History*. His edited history of the University of Maine from 1945 to 2015 is forthcoming.