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Freedom eclipsed by danger

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David J. Gunkel applauds diversity, equality and protection of tenure at US colleges, but despairs at legislation that allows guns in the classroom

From the time Christopher Columbus first got himself lost and accidentally bumped into this land mass we now call North America, Europeans have projected their hopes and dreams across the Atlantic. Likewise, the residents of this New World often look over their shoulders at the "Old World" of Europe with a sense of longing and nostalgia, projecting their own desires and fantasies on to the opposite shore. Although it is possible to write off these transatlantic projections as "the grass is always greener" musings, they do offer opportunities for insightful comparisons.

First, although we often talk about the academy in the US as if it were a single, homogeneous entity, the fact is that American institutions are incredibly diverse. On this side of the pond, higher education includes two-year community colleges, small liberal and fine arts colleges, state-supported research institutions, prestigious private universities and colleges, technical colleges and institutes and online education outlets. The opportunities and challenges faced, for example, by a faculty member at a community college, where teaching is purported to be the principal responsibility and endeavour, are generally of little interest or concern to the scientist at a prestigious research-intensive university, where scholarly productivity, citations in academic journals and external funding are considered to be paramount.

This diversity is both an advantage and a considerable problem. On the one hand, such differences clearly offer students and faculty a wide range of possibilities. There is, it seems, an institution to cater for every budget, life-style, world view and career interest. On the other hand, such diversity makes comparisons of any kind difficult, if not impossible, and faculty members often find themselves involved in political and professional struggles that seem increasingly isolated and localised. Echoing the ongoing debate over healthcare in this country, American academics value the wide range of choice currently available but also view the more focused and centralised European systems as providing considerable political and professional leverage that is absent from the seemingly disorganised and decentralised stateside experiences.

Second, despite this diversity, there is one quintessential element that is rather consistent across these different institutions - tenure. Tenure was originally instituted at US universities and colleges during the 19th century as a means of protecting academic freedom and research integrity. The idea was quite simple and ultimately substantiated by the distinctly American obsession with freedom of expression. The protections offered by tenure allow researchers to dissent from prevailing opinion, to disagree with authorities or to spend time on unfashionable subjects without exposing themselves to retribution by their employers.

From a position outside the ivy-covered walls of the university, however, tenure often appears to be protectionist, offering educators a lifetime appointment irrespective of actual performance in the classroom. For this reason, tenure has always been tenuous and is often scrutinised by the public, state legislators, boards of trustees and administrators. In response, academic institutions and professional organisations find themselves engaged in an ongoing public relations campaign to protect themselves against such assaults.

Then again, it is the inherent diversity of the US system that is both advantageous and problematic. By design,

the standards and criteria for tenure are defined by each institution and administered differently even between departments of the same institution. For this reason, what constitutes tenure at the University of Illinois can be quite different from what comprises tenure at Vanderbilt University or Sauk Valley Community College, and tenure within my own department, communication, looks very different from that instituted in my university's department of physics or School of Education. These local differences obviously allow for sensitivity to important variations in institutional mission, disciplinary standards and faculty career paths. At the same time, however, such variability makes the struggle to define and support tenure something that requires considerable nuance, which is not widely appreciated in US political discourse and policy debates.

Third, as tenure has increasingly been submitted to public scrutiny, US institutions have slowly and quietly begun to divide the faculty ranks. Currently there are two classes of faculty employed in US universities and colleges: tenured and tenure-track professors versus the growing number of part-time instructors and adjuncts. As our increasingly tuition-driven institutions have had to cut costs to remain competitive, many have decided to close expensive tenure lines and have supplemented the loss in instructional personnel by hiring greater numbers of inexpensive adjunct faculty - either working professionals who teach on the side or academic professionals who, for whatever reason, have been unable to secure a tenure-track position. Although this alteration makes good financial sense for the institution, these part-time instructors are seen as a form of cheap and expendable labour. Unlike their tenured counterparts, adjuncts are paid on a per-class basis, rarely enjoy insurance or other employment benefits, and do not participate in faculty shared governance.

On the one hand, institutions, administrators and even members of the faculty often act as if this stratification does not exist. Like good Americans, we continue to believe in and promote the ideology of equity, even when it is abundantly clear that, as George Orwell so aptly said, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." On the other hand, the problem is not necessarily the fact that universities and colleges have employed different kinds of faculty, the problem is that the ratio of tenured professors to adjunct instructors has shifted so radically. At one time, the majority consisted of tenured professors. Currently the opposite is the case, and there are concerns that this change in the composition of the faculty will have an adverse effect on instructional quality, student experience and the daily operation of the institution.

Fourth, if pressed to identify the one advantage of the US system over that of the UK, I would locate it in the area of classroom governance and academic freedom. As I compare notes with my colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic, I find the UK emphasis on instructional management and oversight to be quite baffling. Unless otherwise stipulated, course content at US institutions is the sole responsibility and intellectual property of the faculty member. From an administrative, instructional and even legal perspective, it is the instructor who is considered to be the final arbiter in all matters regarding course content, classroom conduct and evaluations of student achievement. This does not mean that academic courses at US institutions are not subject to review and oversight. It just means that this control is provided through other mechanisms (including departmental guidelines, professional organisations and disciplinary standards) and is not mandated or imposed by outside agencies.

This extreme form of individualisation can, of course, produce some inconsistencies and variability across institutions, making course transfers and comparisons difficult. I recall my own undergraduate experience with a course in existential philosophy. At one institution, the class was listed as a philosophy credit; at another it was credited as a literature class. The variation was a product of the way this particular subject matter had come to be incorporated into the curriculum and which member of the faculty developed and taught the course. Despite these minor inconsistencies and potential inconveniences, academics at US institutions have a wide range of control over their courses and any intrusion from the outside is perceived to be a threat to, and infringement of, academic freedom.

Finally, I feel it is necessary to say something about the hazards of working in higher education in the US - in short, the New World can be dangerous. A case in point: at 3.05pm on 14 February 2008, a former student of my institution, Northern Illinois University, entered a lecture hall and proceeded to discharge firearms into an audience of about 100 students. It was considered to be the fourth-deadliest university shooting on record, and left six students dead, many injured and an entire campus scarred. Although school violence is possible anywhere, this kind of mass shooting appears to be a distinctly American phenomenon, aided by the fact that it seems almost anyone can walk into a local retailer and legitimately purchase high-powered weaponry. To make

matters worse, lawmakers in states including Texas and Missouri have recently advanced legislation that would make it legal for students to carry concealed weapons in the classroom. The idea here is as stupefying as it is simplistic - to protect against shootings by arming the students. Because of this and similar occurrences, including the Virginia Tech shooting in April 2007, I enter my own classroom with a heightened sense of responsibility for my personal safety and that of my students.

I end, therefore, by returning to the point from which I began. Like the frontier of the Wild West, which fuelled European fantasies of adventure, the perceived opportunities of US academic institutions are also haunted by a sense of danger.

Postscript :

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