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The Challenges to Professional Standing Among Academics

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author looks at the challenges to professional standing among academics. Using Michael Zweig's contention that, "The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure" (27), the author explores this perspective by examining the state of higher educational institutions and 21st century trends and factors that affect academic standing across universities and colleges. The author views the changes in human values and profession, global cultural transition, and the changing face of the university from an intellectual to a corporate-oriented model among the factors affecting the professional standing of academics. The transition of the university from faculty-oriented and controlled to administrator-oriented and operated, is seen as a critical factor in this regard as advocated by authors Benjamin Ginsberg and Steven Johnson. Other factors affecting professional standing are related to traits including gender and race as evident from the works of Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, and Galindo. The author examines the perspectives of several authoritative writers and sources including Ginsberg, Readings, Newman, and Johnson on the university and faculty standing. The author concludes that as colleges and universities are increasingly confronted with new challenges, professional standing among academics will continue to be challenged.

Keywords: academic rigor; academics; marginalization; professional standing; professor; racism; sexism; tenure

1. INTRODUCTION

"The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure" (Zweig 27).

In our modern age, so many things have changed and are changing, including human values and our professions and professional standing, especially as the dynamics of a global world and global culture transition society from the past, and even the present, into something which some of us love and desire, while others resist and abhor. One social institution that has dramatically changed in terms of individuals' roles, perception of stability, and social standing is the academy or higher educational institution, which we often call a university or a college. One major change that has taken place in the academy is that of faculty tenure, but

there are also other significant changes that have affected the academy and professional standing among academics. As Zweig contends, “The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure” (27) [14]. Professional standing among academics has been affected by a variety of factors related to the changing nature and characteristic of the academy, as well as broader trends in society.

Factors Affecting Professional Standing Among Academics

While there is a history and contention surrounding faculty tenure in colleges and universities [3], it is not the only factor affecting the professional standing of academics. Dilemmas concerning teaching and research, as well as ethical challenges are also factors that become challenges to the professional standing of academics in 21st century higher education. In a survey carried out by Premeaux and Mondy, it was found that the majority of faculty, both tenured and non-tenured believed that tenure is necessary [11], and while it is a major factor affecting professional standing among academics, there are other factors such as the increasing use of adjuncts and low pay of adjuncts [4]. Another set of factors affecting professional standing among academics stems from race and related traits. For example, Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada and Galindo state that, “Marginalization, racism and sexism manifested as unintended barriers are presented as a few of the barriers faculty of color face in successfully navigating the tenure process” (312) [5]. These factors, apart from affecting tenure, also affect professional standing among academics, as the professional standing among men and women in the academy still reflect some differences. Moreover, minorities, and especially Blacks still represent a relatively small percentage of the faculty across American and global universities, and are believed to hold lower ranks on a general level when compared to their other racial counterparts.

According to Zweig, the challenge to professional standing among academics has been affected by several factors including the corporatization of the university[14]: “As modern corporate management practices gain ground in universities, faculty members are increasingly subject to bigger teaching loads, larger classes, and other forms of speedup” (27) [14]. This perspective is supported by Readings, who in his book, *The University in Ruins*, contends that the current “University of Excellence” model is highly bureaucratic and lacking in dedication to true scholarship and academic rigor and has a narrow scope and vision that do not facilitate faculty growth and recognition [12]. Readings argues that the academy currently has a techno-bureaucratic nature which disavows the traditional construct on which faculty tenure was developed and nurtured [12]. Furthermore, professional standing among academics or faculty is affected because the modern university is highly pro-administrator oriented and faculty becomes secondary in such an atmosphere dominated by external policies and outside influences from corporations and wealthy individuals, as well as legislative policy changes [12]. Another factor affecting professional standing among academics is what Readings describes as an executive and public relations approach to operations and development and the tendency toward a university model where faculty members are mere facilitators of learning [12]. This means that the prestige of the faculty has declined where the university no longer revolves around those who teach and impart knowledge and ideas, but around those who are managers. This is evident in the increasing importance, power, and role of deans, directors, and other administrators in colleges and universities today. Faculty for the most part is relegated to teaching like low-tier workers on the academic factory floor.

Zweig is right to contend that “The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure” (27) [14]. This view is highly supported by Ginsberg who has

done extensive writing and research on professional standing among academics as he argues that there has been a dramatic change in the direction of the University from faculty-centered and faculty-based to administrative and corporate-oriented [8]. Furthermore, professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure, but the important roles that faculty members play in the daily operations and strategic plan for the university. The role is minimal and some faculty have no idea of where their university is headed next because they are often not a part of the decision-making and planning committees that will come to affect the university and their professional standing through closed-door decisions and policies. As Ginsberg notes, the “all-administrative university” has created changes that lead to managerial rather than academic orientation, and faculty are academics at heart and in their roles [8].

Apart from tenure, another factor that has affected and continues to affect the professional standing of academics is that in the last several decades there has been a growth in more administrators than faculty in our modern universities [8], and this has resulted in a university model where faculty are far below on the organizational chart and are treated like menial workers who must respond to administrator demands regardless of how those demands affect perceived and real professional standing and reputation [8]. This is evident in faculty academic standards being compromised to focus on financial and competitive priorities of the modern academy as a business corporation.

Academics are increasingly finding themselves dispensable as the academy changes to become a more efficient modern corporation. The corporate focus alluded to by both Zweig and Readings has created a situation where efficiency and bureaucracy mean that the bottom line becomes a decisive factor in affecting professional standing. The academy that once used to “weed out” individuals based on intellectual principles and criteria is now slimming down based on operational efficiency principles that make tenure both costly and often seen as outdated. Furthermore, professional standing of academics is being affected by the increasing numbers of administrators and professional staff at the expense of faculty [9]. Institutions are becoming inverted pyramids in their organizational layout and design as faculty is becoming the minority group in several colleges and universities. When this occurs, faculty members have less involvement and less representation because of mere numbers. A brief survey of many modern colleges and universities will show that the ratios of professional and administrative staff to faculty are very disturbing, especially as the modern academy takes on non-academic auxiliary functions.

Zweig’s contention that, “The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure” (27) [14] is supported by his argument that faculty support has declined in universities as research activities are less supported, and faculty have to resort to seeking outside what is often corporate support for their research. This he argues, casts the professor in the role of part entrepreneur where he or she becomes subordinate and supplicant to those with financial power [14]; the same corporations and wealthy philanthropists who have altered the academy and changed faculty prestige. Furthermore, and consistent with Ginsberg’s and Readings’ arguments, Zweig argues that the professional standing of academics is being affected by a shift in the role of the professor as a job-ready trainer as there are “expectations that the professor is there to generate a certain number of market-ready students, the “product” of higher educational institutions, and to do research that corresponds directly to the needs of business” (27) [14]. This is especially true as the modern university becomes less preoccupied with creation of intellect or knowledge, what Zweig calls “The life of the mind” (27) [14], and Readings describes as becoming less like the “Intellectual University” of the past [12]. This goes without saying, because in a university

where knowledge and scholarship are not primary, but rather training and transaction, the professional standing of academics will naturally be challenged and will eventually decline.

Another reason that Zweig provides for his assertion that “The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure” (27) [14], is that university administrators are increasingly treating faculty more like regular employees and less like colleagues [14]. Faculty members of today’s universities and colleges are being driven to focus their research on corporate needs and this makes them increasingly more like the skilled working class [14]. The changing role of the faculty is a major contributing factor that challenges professional standing, and the changing of the guards from traditional academics to administrator and corporate managers is truly affecting how faculty members are viewed and has contributed to decline in professional prestige. People are no longer in awe of the professor, but the administrator who is credited with the university’s growth and progress despite never contributing anything to the creation of knowledge but cold hard cash or brand identity. Elliott notes that “Professors once ran university affairs largely by themselves [and] Now they are at the mercy of proliferating ‘deanlets’” (1) [6]. This more than any other relegates the faculty and knowledge-intellect to secondary or even lower priorities in modern universities.

Zweig has provided us with several other factors that affect the professional standing of academics apart from tenure. For example, he argues that the imposition of corporate management practices on universities and colleges has changed both contents and processes in instructions, and faculty now play lesser roles in driving knowledge creation and the philosophy of programs and schools as they must now teach courses that they have not designed and administer standardized tests that they have neither created or graded [14]. What was once the sole mental and intellectual exercise of faculty that increased power, prestige, and value is now handled by corporations such as publishing companies and consulting firms [14].

Another major factor that Zweig and others point to as a challenge to the professional standing of academics is the increasing use of adjuncts by universities and colleges to teach courses in order to avoid paying off benefits and escape the requirements of tenure [14]. Having adjuncts teach courses is a cost-saving strategy for colleges and universities because adjuncts are paid at “per-course” rate and this is far less than paying regular faculty [14]. Adjuncts have no benefits and they do not have offices, and are hired at will by most institutions. The deluge of adjuncts upon the modern academy has also contributed to declining prestige of the professorship and contributed to the questioning of the need for tenure or permanent academic standing. Furthermore, adjuncts are seen as a challenge to the professional standing of academics because about 40 percent of adjuncts has non-academic jobs [1], and they drive down salary through competition, and also most do not invest in research and the activities that promote academics and the profession as prestigious and noble as it should be. According to Dedman and Pearch,

The use of adjunct professors continues to grow. The percentage of adjuncts has doubled in the past three decades. Many adjuncts are aspiring academics that have been kept out of a system concerned with watching the bottom line. As college and university budgets continue to tighten, adjunct instructors who cost about one-third what full-time faculty members do remain an economical choice for institutions of higher education (22) [4].

The continued economic challenges faced by universities and colleges is thus a major factor that is affecting professional standing among academics, as financial concerns continue to force most colleges and universities to either deny tenure or hire more adjuncts. For example, in a university in the south recently, the majority of faculty eligible for tenure were

denied tenure because of the institution's financial crisis and inability to pay. This continues to be a problem at that particular institution, and since December 2013, three valuable faculty members had resigned because of being denied tenure on financial-economic grounds.

"The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure" (27) [14], but results from "increased scrutiny of their productivity and the relevance of their research, broadsides against tenure, attacks on their expertise and ability to collectively bargain, or their shrinking role in the affairs of their institutions" (1) [8]. This certainly summarizes the major factors that challenge the professional standing of academics today, and we should perhaps expect to see an increase in this challenge as faculty standing will be affected as the university or academy continues its shift from being faculty-focused to being administrator-management driven, and where Kant's environment of *reason*, and Humboldt's idea of *culture*, are gradually replaced by a modern techno-bureaucratic notion of "excellence" [12] that has nothing to do with scholarship or intellect. The "Idea of the University" [10] has longed changed and this alone created the foundation for the decline of the faculty [2] in what have become increasingly non-secular academic entities [13].

2. CONCLUSION

Professional standing among academics will continue to be challenged by several factors as colleges and universities are increasingly confronted with new challenges that only seem to grow more difficult to include "maintaining technological infrastructures, dealing with budgetary constraints, recruiting and retaining diverse students, finding new sources of revenue, and responding to new accountability requirements" (50) [7]. Furthermore, increase in competition in the higher education arena has forced many colleges and universities to completely change from an academic-intellectual-oriented model to a corporate-oriented model where faculty, the prestige of the professorship, as well as research, are no longer seen as value-adders, but detractors in an age where speed and flexibility matter more than academic rigor.

With increasing orientation toward viewing students more and more as "customers" who are always right, rather than pupils in learning who need guidance and correction, the new approach to academic management and operations has created an academy of the 21st century and the future where faculty standing depends on customer relationship management, feedback of increasingly disgruntled and poorly motivated, unwilling learners, meeting financial goals, and non-academic performance bottom lines. Finally, the politics of education and competing ideologies regarding correctness and values seem to have faculty or academics at a disadvantage, especially when colleges and universities depending on decreasing student markets must hire those who drive the traffic rather than those who raise standards and increase consciousness. Whatever the case, tenure is rapidly disappearing from many higher educational institutions, and a variety of powerful factors are simultaneously working to challenge the professional standing of academics who once were regarded with pious admiration and intellectual reverence.

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